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From Red Lights to Red Flags: A History of Gender in Colonial and Contemporary Vietnam

by

Quang-Anh Richard Tran

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Rhetoric

and the Designated Emphasis

in

Women, Gender, and Sexuality

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in Charge:

Professor Judith Butler, Co-Chair

Professor Peter Zinoman, Co-Chair

Professor Michael Lucey

Professor Ramona Naddaff

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## Abstract

From Red Lights to Red Flags: A History of Gender in Colonial and Contemporary Vietnam

By

Quang-Anh Richard Tran

Doctor of Philosophy in Rhetoric

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Judith Butler, Co-Chair

Professor Peter Zinoman, Co-Chair

This dissertation argues that the public discourse of Vietnam's periods of modernity—the late French colonial era (1930-1940) and that of the post-socialist decades (1986-2005)—produced interlocking notions of what I call queer subjects, subjects who oppose or exceed a normative understanding of heterosexual reproduction. The dissertation posits, however, a diachronic rupture in the dominant meaning of queer between these two periods. Whereas the former exhibited a capacious vision of gender and sexuality, one that pushed the imagined frontiers of the human body, the post-socialist decades marked a retreat to a static notion of mythic tradition that pathologized and purged queer bodies through recourse to a late nineteenth-century European discourse of gender-inversion, the notion of a man “trapped” in a women's body or vice versa. To demonstrate this change, the first chapter argues that the normative meaning of gender and sexuality in late colonial Vietnam was far more dynamic and expansive than the contemporary scholarship has acknowledged. The second chapter maintains that the sexual regime that Foucault and others scholars have identified in Europe reaches its limit in the Vietnamese colony. The third and final chapter demonstrates the emergence of this sexual regime, albeit in transmuted form, during Vietnam's post-socialist decades (1986-2005). Together these chapters support the overall argument of a historical rupture in the cultural meaning of queer genders and sexualities between the period of late French colonialism and post-socialism. In reconstructing this rupture, the dissertation aims to de-familiarize contemporary practices and commitments and, by so doing, illuminate viable alternative forms of gendered and sexual life in twentieth-century Vietnam.

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## Preface

This dissertation argues that the public discourse of Vietnam's periods of modernity—the late French colonial era (1930-1940) and that of the post-socialist decades (1986-2005)—produced interlocking notions of what I shall call queer subjects. I use the term “queer” to refer to a constellation of ideas, identifications, sensations and narratives about gender and sexuality that oppose or exceed a normative understanding of heterosexual reproduction. The dissertation posits, however, a diachronic rupture in the dominant meaning of queer between these two periods. Whereas the former exhibited a capacious vision of gender and sexuality, one that pushed the imagined frontiers of the human body, the post-socialist decades marked a retreat to a static notion of mythic tradition that pathologized and purged queer bodies through recourse to a late nineteenth-century European discourse of gender-inversion, the notion of a man “trapped” in a women's body or vice versa. By reconstructing this historical rupture, the project hopes to defamiliarize accepted practices, beliefs and commitments and thereby illuminate viable alternative forms of gendered and sexual life in twentieth-century Vietnam.

Some of the prevailing scholarship on Vietnamese modernity has unwittingly taken for granted heterosexual dimorphism as the modality of sexual organization in their narrative reconstructions of the gendered past. This scholarship has presumed a binary and stable notion of gender and sexual identity. Yet, queer scholars have begun to question the monolithic status of this identity by revealing it as an effect of a specific sexual regime borne at the crossroads of a constellation of Western cultural and historical forces. By showing its historical conditions of possibility, queer scholars have sought to loosen the regime's epistemological stranglehold on contemporary conceptions of gender and sexuality. In so doing, they have sought to open up both historical and imagined forms of sexual subjects that this regime has foreclosed. But whereas a substantial body of research and knowledge exists about these issues in the West, little historical scholarship has been produced in the case of twentieth-century Vietnam. Yet, because of the country's complex history of rule under French colonialism, it remains to be determined the extent to which this Western regime extended its influence to this corner of the globe. Did cultural contact with the French bring about an analogue sexual regime in the Vietnamese colony? What radical changes in cultural norms, if any, did French colonialism bring about with respect *queer* genders and sexualities? If so, did these norms endure through the post-socialist decades?

As I have indicated, the results of the research suggest a somewhat unexpected finding: while the European idea of gender inversion did survive in transmuted form in Vietnam, its successful transmission failed to occur during the colonial period in question (1930-1940). In fact, as the dissertation will suggest, the Vietnamese reception of the idea of gender inversion may not have derived from the French, but rather from the Soviet Union in the late 1950s and early 1960s and, from there, to survive in renewed form through Vietnam's post-socialist decades (1986-2005). Although the dissertation will advance this idea as one plausible explanation to this unusual ordering of affairs, the primary purpose will be less to locate historical causation than to show change over time in the cultural conception of gender and sexuality. Due to practical considerations and the limitations of access to materials, the

dissertation does not examine the socialist archive in close detail. This will surely be a fertile area of research for scholars in the future. It is my hope that this dissertation has nevertheless succeeded in supplementing some of the current gaps in knowledge and, above all, sustained the promise of queer critique: the critical elaboration of alternative visions of gendered and sexual personhood that aims to open up possibilities for a more livable life for some in the present.

### **The Scholarship on Gender and Modernity in Vietnam during the Colonial and Renovation Periods**

Scholars of Vietnam agree that although different political regimes governed the periods of late French colonialism (1930-1940) and post-socialism (1986-2005), both periods represented for the country dramatic moments of transition to modernity. Perhaps consistent with other parts of the globe, “modernity” in the Vietnamese context was marked by rapid social, cultural and economic modernization, a profound departure from traditional practices, beliefs and epistemologies. The most notable conditions in both the colonial and post-socialist periods are a relative openness to the market economy, and hence to the global circulation and exchanges of products, commodities, ideas, trends and fashion; a booming printing press, albeit one that was punctured by political censorship; and most important, a heightened sense of collective anxiety about the uncertainties of the modern era. Explaining the dramatic changes that took place in late colonial Vietnam, Peter Zinoman has aptly described this period as exhibiting the coexistence of an “incongruity” between “traditional epistemologies” and “modernizing development” (p.4).<sup>1</sup> Likewise, in her examination of post-socialist Vietnam, Lisa Drummond has described the period as saturated with a public rhetoric of “civility” and “modernity,” embodied in the Party’s Civilized Way of Life and Cultured Family Campaign. A response to the rapid societal changes wrought by the open market, these campaigns produced a standard by which all families ought to adhere to become “harmonious” and “happy” (p.162).<sup>2</sup> Like the colonial era, then, the post-socialist decades also exhibited the existence of an epistemological “incongruity” that Zinoman has called of the earlier period.

With respect to gender norms, scholars of both periods have extensively demonstrated the shifting roles and cultural discourses of “men” and “women.” For the colonial era, David Marr’s seminal monograph *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*,<sup>3</sup> documents the cultural, social and political transition from a patriarchal tradition to a modern one characterized by a surge in women’s public discourse and various political mobilization campaigns. This same transition is documented by other researchers and scholars, including Duong Van Mai Elliot,<sup>4</sup> Shawn McHale<sup>5</sup> and Hue-Tam Ho-Tai,<sup>6</sup> but perhaps most graphically by Nguyen Van Ky in his *La Société Vietnamiennne Face a là Modernité*<sup>7</sup> which provides journalistic drawings of arguably one

<sup>1</sup> Peter Zinoman, ed., *Dumb Luck* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Lisa Drummond, “The Modern ‘Vietnamese Woman’: Socialization and Women’s Magazines,” *Gender Practices in Contemporary Vietnam*, eds. Lisa Drummond and Helle Rydstrom (Denmark: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1925-1945* (Berkeley: University of California, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> Duong Van Mai Elliott, *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Shawn McHale, “Printing and Power: Vietnamese Debates over Women’s Place in Society, 1918-1934,” *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts*, eds. K.W. Taylor and John K. Whitmore, vol. 19, Studies on Southeast Asia (Ithaca: Cornell University 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Hue Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Ky Van Nguyen, *La Société Vietnamiennne Face a La Modernité: Le Tonkin De La Fin Du Xixe Siècle À La Seconde Guerre Mondiale* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1995).

of the most iconic figures of this period: the “New Women.” Through her flashy dress, hair-style, high heels and use of make-up, this modern woman stood in stark contrast to more modest ideals of traditional femininity. For these scholars, this iconic figure is the embodiment of this transition to colonial modernity in representing a decisive departure from the traditional meanings of femininity and womanhood.

Likewise, scholars of the post-socialist or Renovation period have also documented the complex ways in which larger structural and global forces altered local gender norms, influencing the ways in which men and women craft themselves as male or female. Lisa Drummond and Helle Ryndstrom have already surveyed the extensive secondary literature on this question,<sup>8</sup> regardless of the various specific thematic problems that researchers and scholars have examined, almost all agree that, in contrast to the colonial era, the State discourse of the Renovation period marked a shift to “traditional” values, and by extension, to the corresponding norms of gender and sexuality. In her analysis of the Party’s ideological campaigns and modern women magazines, for example, Drummond explains that, “[b]oth signal a shift to a conservative view of women social roles, one which emphasizes women’s domestic responsibilities” (p.158).<sup>9</sup> Drummond further notes that in place of the collective “New Person” of the socialist era, the Party now, “fostered a reconstruction of Vietnamese culture and Vietnamese ‘traditions’ to evoke a narrative of traditional culture wherein the family unit is paramount” (p.176).<sup>10</sup> Other scholars will examine this question of the “family”-unit at length and in all its historical complexities, charting its cultural and political evolution, from the colonial to the contemporary periods.<sup>11</sup> But the key point here is that in the post-socialist period, unlike the colonial one, the idea of “modernity” became associated with civility, propriety and, above all, with traditional norms of gender and sexuality.

### **Shifting the Epistemic Frame: Queer Interventions in History**

It is within this context that I intervene in the scholarly literature, bringing to bear certain queer theoretical insights to the historical reconstruction of Vietnam’s two periods of modernity. Although the prior body of scholarship has made important contributions in our understanding of the shifting cultural norms that govern men’s and women’s gender practices, these studies have nevertheless taken for granted heterosexual dimorphism as the prevailing modality of sexual organization in their interpretation of the past. By “heterosexual dimorphism,” I refer not only to a modern form of sexual orientation—the binary opposite of homosexuality—but also a complex sexual regime that uniformly aligns and renders coherent sexual anatomy, gender, psyche and desire into a binary and stable form of identity with the teleological end of biological reproduction. This regime authorizes certain narrow forms of sexual personhood—namely, heterosexuality—and de-authorizes the plurality of other possible and historical forms of genders and sexualities. The point is not to deny the historical or phenomenological existence of “real” heterosexual men and women, but rather to claim that the coherency of gender and sexual identity is an historical achievement, an effect of a complex array of discursive, cultural and

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<sup>8</sup> Lisa Drummond and Helle Ryndstrom, eds., *Gender Practices in Contemporary Vietnam* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Drummond, “The Modern ‘Vietnamese Woman’: Socialization and Women’s Magazines.”

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Danièle Bélanger and Magali Barbieri, “Introduction: State, Families, and the Making of Transitions in Vietnam,” *Reconfiguring Families in Contemporary Vietnam*, eds. Danièle Bélanger and Magali Barbieri (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), Danièle Bélanger and Khuat Thu Hong, eds., *Gender, Household, State: Đổi Mới in Viet Nam* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2002).

institutional forms of power. This form of power renders heterosexuality invisible, natural, self-evident and hence without any need to be scrutinized as itself an historical formation. Queer scholars have attempted to theorize this phenomenon through a number of critical concepts. Judith Butler has famously coined this form of power the “heterosexual matrix,” by which she refers to the “grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized” (p.151).<sup>12</sup> Other scholars, such as Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant have introduced the idea of “heteronormativity” by which they refer to the “sense of rightness—embedded in things and not just in sex.” They further explain, “Heteronormativity is more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; and education; as well as in conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture” (p.173).<sup>13</sup> As Warner and Berlant suggest, this power is far more insidious than simply an overt form of discrimination against a specific group because this power has installed itself as a norm in the complex manifestations of culture, discourse and institutions.

One way in which queer theory has attempted to oppose these heteronormative effects of power is to call into question the uniform alignment of these elements—atomy, sex, gender, psyche, desire etc.—what Foucault once called the “fictitious unity of sex.”<sup>14</sup> By disaggregating the various historical sediments of this regime and disrupting their putative necessity, queer scholars are able to reveal them as arbitrary cultural and historical forms of sexual organization. If gender and sexuality have a history, so the logic goes, then they are no longer immutable truths but contingent forms of social and cultural organization that have assumed the status of timelessness. It follows, therefore, that other forms of social organization are possible, forms that hold open the promise of alternative and viable visions of gendered and sexual personhood. Much of the work of queer critique has been to expose this ideological fiction and to bring into relief the instability of these composite elements, and thereby loosen the regime’s epistemological stranglehold on conceptions of gender and sexuality.

Insofar as scholars of Vietnam Studies accept this dominant modality of sexual organization, whether consciously or not, they simultaneously shore up the status quo and reproduce the prevailing structures of power in the reconstruction of the gendered past. This is my main criticism of Nguyen Quoc Vinh and his pioneering study, perhaps one of the first to examine the question of homosexuality in Vietnam based on primary sources. In “Deviant Bodies and Dynamics of Displacement of Homoerotic Desire in Vietnamese Literature from and about the French Colonial Period (1858-1954),”<sup>15</sup> Vinh locates a pattern of homoerotic displacement in the primary sources that he examines. Stating that “desire” is a “hopelessly slippery” term, he keeps it at an “intuitive” usage, defining it as a “relational state characterized by the drive to appropriate so as to define a Self (as desiring subject) in terms of an Other (as object of desire).” He opens his paper with Xuan Dieu’s poem on the relationship between Rimbaud and Verlaine, showing that same-sex relations can never be depicted in its pure presence but are almost always projected onto a realm of otherness, in this case, French culture. He then proceeds by showing references to an array of gendered and sexual subjectivities—

<sup>12</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Queer Studies: An Interdisciplinary Reader* eds. Robert J. Corber and Stephen Valocchi (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol 1* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990): p.154.

<sup>15</sup> Nguyen Quoc Vinh, “Deviant Bodies and Dynamics of Displacement of Homoerotic Desire in Vietnamese Literature from and About the French Colonial Period (1858-1954),” *Hop Luru [Confluence]* 42.August-September (1998).

hermaphroditism, transvestism, sodomy, gender-crossing, male-narcissism. Such a survey is in itself path-breaking; he then makes, however, the problematic claim that all these forms are reducible to covert “homoerotic” expression. Vinh concludes: “[I]t is precisely these dynamics of displacement operating at numerous levels and in so many different ways that provide for the *enabling condition* to articulate, and perhaps more significantly to reclaim and rearticulate, such instances of *homoerotic desire* for which there would otherwise be no place in the discursive space of the *normative sexual symbolic*” (p.9, my emphases). Vinh implies, in other words, that since “homoerotic” desire is considered deviant, other kinds of rhetorical substitutions--“displacements”—must take its place in the “normative sexual symbolic.” These substitutions include the diverse forms of gendered and sexual subjectivities mentioned above, the “enabling conditions” that allow for the articulation of “homoerotic desire.” Now, my dissertation will ultimately oppose this displacement thesis. The bulk of the primary sources and secondary scholarship do not bear out this argument.

In fact, certain questions necessarily follow from Vinh’s claim. First, how do we know that the period of French colonialism was uniformly marked by homophobia? Is this not a necessary assumption in order for his argument to hold? After all, why would homoerotic desire need to undergo a “dynamics of displacement” if homophobia were not the prevailing norm? Vinh’s argument further assumes that these other rhetorical substitutions are culturally and historically normative or, at least, more normative. If they were not, they would cease to function as substitutions, “displacements” or the “enabling condition” for homosexual articulation. Conversely, homoerotic desire is presumed to be not only non-normative but also the essential form to which all other gendered and sexual subjectivities are reduced. If sexual normativity is itself historical, an effect that arises within specific contexts, Vinh would have to elaborate further on precisely the question of norms. Without supplying evidence for the normative status of either homoerotic desire or its manifold substitutions, what he calls the “normative sexual symbolic,” however, Vinh allows “homoerotic desire” to monopolize the space of non-normativity. Vinh considers the contemporary pejorative status of homosexuality as a conclusion rather than a premise subject to critical scrutiny.

Vinh’s study exemplifies one of the challenges of research on and writing about the history of gender and sexuality. In demonstrating the social and cultural processes that form an identity, in this case homosexuality, the researcher may unwittingly accept as trans-historical contemporary society’s prevailing modality of sexual organization. In this case, Vinh has accepted the stability, coherency and binary frame of homo- and heterosexuality rather than historicizing the frame itself. Joan W. Scott explains:

If instead of asking how women were treated in some former time, we ask how and in what circumstances the difference of their sex came to matter in their treatment, then we have provided the basis for an analysis of ‘women’ that is not a rediscovery of ourselves in the past...Or if we document not the long history of homophobia, but the ways and times and terms in which certain sexual practices were pathologized and others normalized, we historicize rather than naturalize both homosexuality and heterosexuality” (p.98-99).<sup>16</sup>

Just as certain kinds of scholarship have mistakenly attempted to install a timeless subject of history, so Vinh has unwittingly projected a contemporary identity and its normative status onto the past. As a result, in addition to limiting what is possible and “real,” one profound—albeit

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<sup>16</sup> Joan W. Scott, “Chapter 6: After History?,” *Schools of Thought: Twenty-Five Years of Interpretive Social Science*, eds. Joan Scott and Debra Keates (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

unintended—effect on scholarship is a narrowing of the subjects of history. Since the narratives of the past become framed by this ideological fiction, history is written at the expense of a potentially vast plurality of other possible historical and local forms of gendered and sexual subjects.

To “shift the epistemic frame,” as I have called this section, is to take seriously the historical question that queer theory invites us to consider. At once echoing Foucault and going beyond him, Judith Butler asks: “What, given the contemporary order of being, can I be?” She continues, “This...does not quite broach the question of what it is *not* to be, or what it is to occupy the place of not-being within the field of being, living, breathing, attempting to love, as that which is neither fully negated nor acknowledged as being” (p.184).<sup>17</sup> Butler thus invites us to consider the complex interrelation between knowledge, its production and the cultural field of intelligibility. To enact a “queer intervention” in history, in my view, is to open up that epistemic field that the dominant sexual order, wherever our location may be, has foreclosed both to the researcher and to the narratives that researchers have constructed of the past. The possible subjects that emerge within this epistemic field are what I designate as “queer.” But unlike Vinh, I do not conflate beforehand these subjectivities and consider them as substitutions or displacements of each other or a reflection of the contemporary normative sexual order; rather, I leave open the historical possibility of their radical singularity: within the terms of their varied subcultural contexts, some of these queer subjects may still be emerging, while others appear in that liminal zone that Butler has called the place of “not-being,” the product of society’s exclusionary norms, and still others may be entirely opaque to contemporary readers—Vietnamese or otherwise—separated as we are by both temporal and cultural distance. The challenges and opportunities of reconstructing the queer past logically lead to the next subject of discussion: the archive.

### **On Reading the Queer Archive**

For this study, the bulk of my primary sources comes from newspapers and journals of both the colonial and post-socialist periods. As I have indicated, the present scholarship has reconstructed a narrative that is uniformly a history of heterosexual dimorphism. This narrative stands in stark contrast to the empirical observation that, following Georg Simmel, Gilbert Herdt has made concerning sexual cultures at the turn of the twentieth-century: “there are too many categories and too few sexes to explain the immense varieties of human experience” (p.12).<sup>18</sup> If we begin with the premise that human gendered and sexual experience is far more plural than has been supposed, then I wanted, first, to recover—to the extent possible—this other region of sexual plurality and, second, to understand the relation between this other region and the prevailing cultural norms.

With these questions in mind, I examined popular colonial journals that flourished soon after the spread of the modern vernacular beginning in the late 1920s. I looked at over a dozen of these print sources<sup>19</sup> spanning roughly the decade between 1930 and 1940, the tail end of the

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<sup>17</sup> Judith Butler, “Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality,” *The Transgender Studies Reader*, eds. Susan Stryker and Stephen White (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Gilbert Herdt, “Third Sexes and Third Genders,” *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, ed. Gilbert Herdt (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> These sources include: *Nu Gioi Chung* (Women’s Bell) [1918]; *Tieng Dan* (People’s Voice) [1929]; *Nam Nu Gioi Chung* (Men and Women’s Bell) [1930]; *Phu Nu Tan Van* (New Women’s News) [1929-1934]; *Phong Hoa* (Mores) [1932-1934]; *Ngay Nay* (These Days) [1937-1945]; *Khoa Hoc Tap Chi* (Science Journal) (1931-1940); *Duoc Nha Nam* (Southern Torch) [1928-1937]; *Dan Ba Moi* (New Women) [1935]; *Dan Ba Moi* (New Women) [1936]; *Viet Nu* (Vietnamese Women) [1937]; *Tien Bo* (Progress) [1936]; *Bao Loa* (The Speaker) [1935-1936]; *Dan*

colonial period. These journals were serialized monthly, weekly and, as the years progressed, daily. These journals were also the main publication venues for health columns, letters, advertisements, cartoons, serialized reportages and modern works of fiction. Additionally, I also examined popular sex manuals as well as grammar books, personal letters, memoirs, dictionaries. Together these documents serve as some of the key sources on which scholars of Vietnam Studies rely to reconstruct the cultural history of this period.

That said, not all sources were readily available in their entirety. More often than not, entire years were missing from newspaper or journal collections; sometimes only parts of a collection were available; other times, they were too fragile for handling as to be inaccessible altogether. These problems are compounded by the fact that political censorship has left gaps in some documents, as we shall see, and the researcher is consequently left interpreting the past on the basis of fragments. Also, the fact that we are searching for traces of *queer* subjects, subjects who fall outside of the dominant sexual order, further brings into relief the need for a hermeneutic strategy to read ellipses, silences, absence, gaps and so forth. Some of these queer subjects, for instance, may not want to be in the public limelight, but find themselves suddenly thrust in the midst of a public scandal. In such cases, the documents leave traces of a public record that have to be interpreted both for what they reveal of the queer subject and the dominant cultural norm. The latter kind of enquiry will raise the humanistic question of textual interpretation—of how best to read, how best to interpret and understand that which is opaque and difficult to discern, given the practical challenges of historical and cultural otherness.<sup>20</sup> No easy transparent access is possible, even in cases where we examine memoirs and personal letters. Are these documents a reflection of queer desire between individuals arising out of a specific context e.g. the prison environment? Or are they part and parcel of a larger cultural milieu? All of these kinds of questions become relevant, and the project thus entails drawing on all the hermeneutic resources and strategies available, but perhaps most often practiced today in literary and rhetorical studies.

Likewise, for the post-socialist period (1986-2005), I base my analysis on the dominant print sources available for the two decades since the country's transition to an open market in 1986.<sup>21</sup> I was able to find more than 277 relevant items. I also culled all non-fiction books written in Vietnamese in the National Library in Hanoi related to gender and sexuality. Of the seventy non-fiction books identified, at least twenty eight address the issue of queer genders and sexualities; the majority of these items were health and sex manuals. In sum, for this latter period, my argument is based on more than 305 primary sources. An analysis of these sources is the subject of chapter 3. Like the colonial era journals, these newspapers include a wide variety

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*Moi* (The New People) [1938-1939]; *Ngươi Moi* (The New People) [1939]; *Moi* (New) [1939]; *Tiếng Dân* (People's Voice) [1939-1940; 1942-1943]; *Dan Ba* (Women) [1939-1945]; *Nuoc Nam* (Country of the South) [1939-1942]; *Tuan Le* (The Weekly) [1939-1940]; *Thoi The* (The Times) [1940-1941].

<sup>20</sup> As the *Harvard Guide to American History* once remarked, "If a time machine were available to carry the historian back through the past at will, he would confront, on stepping off the machine, the very problems of interpretation he thought he left behind" (p.85). Quoted in Joan W. Scott, "Chapter 6: After History?." It does not follow, however, that this view leads to a radical relativism. See Steven Mailloux and Sanford Levinson, "Introduction," *Interpreting Law and Literature: A Hermeneutic Reader*, eds. Sanford Levinson and Steven Mailloux (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), Steven Mailloux, ed., *Rhetoric, Sophistry, Pragmatism*, vol. 15 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995).

<sup>21</sup> They include the following: *An Ninh Thủ Đô* [Security in the Capital]; *Công An Nhân Dân* [People's Police], *Công An Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh* [Ho Chi Minh City's Police], *Nhân Dân* [The People], and *Thanh Niên* [Youth], *Tuổi Trẻ* [Age of Youth],; and *Tiền Phong* [Vanguard].

of items including but not limited to news reports, scandals, reportages, personal letters, serialized works of fiction, health advisories, love advice columns and so on. Unlike the colonial period, however, few scholars have examined these newspapers in their entirety and almost none have looked at them with an eye towards the subject of queer genders and sexualities and, in particular, same-sex sexuality. Yet, these sources were arguably one of the key pedagogical resources about sexual norms available to the vast majority of the people. In fact, as some scholars have suggested, the primary source of sexual education in Vietnam during this period derives not from schools, teachers and the home, but the public media.<sup>22</sup> Taken together, these documents serve as invaluable sources of evidence about the prevailing sexual norms and capture something of the overall queer context of this period, a context that has remained unexamined in the present scholarly literature.

### **Dissertation Chapters**

To show changes in the meaning of queer genders and sexualities over time, the first two chapters demonstrate that the Vietnamese imagined a far more dynamic conception of sexual and gendered life during the late colonial period than the post-socialist one. As we shall see, the post-socialist period marked the State's enforcement of traditional gender norms. In the context of this enforcement, the third and final chapter demonstrates the plurality of queer subjects that emerge as a by-product of the State's exclusionary norms, embodied most prominently in the figure of the gender-crossing homosexual.

In particular, Chapter One reconstructs the flourishing of gender plasticity during the late French colonial period in Vietnam (1930-1940). Whereas scholars tend to locate this period as the genesis of the modern Vietnamese women's liberation movement, I demonstrate that they have taken for granted the idea of heterosexual dimorphism in their reconstructions. In particular, scholars have unwittingly plotted a narrative that collapses the history of gender emancipation into that of heterosexual dimorphism, giving short shrift to the historical articulation of the textured and polyvalent meaning of gender itself. I show how the early 1930s stood at the crossroads between two key movements: Vietnam's former ties to the East Asian cultural tradition and an emerging and influential Western one. As a result, the period was, in fact, characterized by far more epistemic upheaval in gender and sexual norms than scholars have supposed. I then go on to show this complexity in the archive, uncovering a wide variety of queer figures that appeared in the public imagination: classical male friendships; army women disguised as men; women who possessed beards; women who undertook "masculine" writing; cases of cross-dressing in literary works; hermaphrodites who transcended the idea of sexual dimorphism; accounts of same-sex erotic relations; and numerous cases of sex-changes and the unknown frontiers of reproductive science. All of these examples lend interpretive weight to the claim that this period exhibited far more openness to a variety of gendered and sexual modalities of becoming.

Chapter Two maintains that the sexual regime that Foucault and other scholars identified in nineteenth-century Europe reaches its limit in late colonial Vietnam (1930-1940). My argument is based on a negative inference. If this regime did, in fact, make significant headway into the colony, then we ought to be able to locate its effects in the medical, psychoanalytic,

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<sup>22</sup> Marie-Eve Blanc, "Sex Education for Vietnamese Adolescents in the Context of the Hiv/Aids Epidemic: The Ngos, the School, the Family and the Civil Society," *Sexual Cultures in East Asia: The Social Construction of Sexuality and Sexual Risk in a Time of Aids*, ed. Evelyne Micollier (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004), David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Youth in the 1990s*, Australian-Vietnam Research Project, vol. 3 (Sydney: School of Economic and Financial Studies, Macquarie University, 1996).

cultural, and institutional discourses of this period—when French culture would presumably have made its strongest impact. If we cannot clearly locate these effects, then it cannot be the case that this sexual regime had yet achieved hegemony. Indeed, an examination of the prior discursive sites reveals a far more lukewarm and uneven reception. A growing body of scholarship suggests that Western medicine may not have made the substantial impact on the local culture as previously believed; the reception of psychoanalysis was also lukewarm, at best, and in cases where it was received, it was adapted for other local causes, such as the free-love movement; the yoking of homosexuality and sexual inversion—one of the key conceits of nineteenth-century European sexology—is completely absent in this period. In fact, the definition of “sex” or “gender” found in key sources of this period lack any association with a psychic disposition. The evidence suggests that the inclusion of a psychic gender disposition in the definition of sex/gender does not appear until the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (or North Vietnam) was consolidated and maintained ongoing cultural and political ties with the Soviet Union for the next three decades. It is not surprising, then, that the cultural attitudes towards same-sex eroticism during the late French colonial period was much more open-ended and ambivalent, lacking the vicious forms of discrimination that are observed in the contemporary period.

Chapter Three demonstrates the dominance of this European sexual regime in the public discourse of Vietnam’s post-socialist periods, the periods of the open-market beginning in 1986 to 2005. I argue that this discourse exhibited a persistent anxiety focused on the epistemology of gender. In its anxiety this discourse produced a morphology of the homosexual who was embodied in the ambiguous figure of the gender-crosser, a figure that is a vestige and translation of the discourse of gender inversion in late nineteenth-century Europe. Scholars of this period have persuasively demonstrated that since Vietnam’s transition to a market-economy, the State shifted its fundamental regulatory target to the “household-” or “family”-unit. Through its Cultured Family campaigns, for example, the State promoted a rhetoric of modern propriety by encouraging, paradoxically, a return to traditional gender norms. Scholars who have employed the State’s foundational concept of gender ultimately limit their studies to problems related to marriage and the household. But in so doing, they lose sight of those subjects who fail to conform to official standards of gender recognition. In specifying the parameters of gender recognition and comportment, the State had to exclude certain kinds of characters and to base its identity and territory on those exclusions. One such exclusion was embodied in the figure of the gender-crossing homosexual.

## CHAPTER 1. The Flourishing of Gender Plasticity in French Colonial Vietnam, 1930-1940

[T]o show the limits (*delimitter*) of a problem, to point to its direction and orientation (*l'orientation*), to mark the borders (*marquer les limites*) is in some sense already to arrive at a place of overcoming.<sup>1</sup>

--Phan Văn Hùm, 1934, Vietnamese intellectual

In the world of reductionist explanation, what mattered was the flat, horizontal, immovable foundation of physical fact: sex.<sup>2</sup>

--Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex*

It is the agency of sex that we must break away from, if we aim—through a tactical reversal of the various mechanisms of sexuality—to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance.<sup>3</sup>

--Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. I*

Rebel against tyranny and despotism.<sup>4</sup>

--Nguyen An Ninh, lawyer and anti-colonial activist in Vietnam, 1900-1943

Scholars tend to narrate colonial Vietnamese modernity by underscoring a transition from patriarchal tradition to the rise of the women's liberation movement. Whereas women in the nineteenth-century were subordinate to a Confucian patriarchal regime, serving as either imperial concubines or objects of exchange in arranged marriages, the late 1920s and early 1930s are considered the decisive historical markers of gender emancipation and the advancement of the ideals of the "New Women."<sup>5</sup> David Marr writes, for example, that the "women question" became a focal point around which other societal issues revolved. Women saw themselves, Marr writes, as a "social group with particular interests, grievances, and demands" (191).<sup>6</sup> Shawn McHale likewise suggests that between 1918 and 1930, a "sea change" had taken place in Vietnamese society's perception of the place of women. Women's groups, McHale writes, eventually "adopted a more activist stance and engaged in spirited debates over women's

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<sup>1</sup> Phan Văn Hùm, "Phát Văn Đề Phải Cho Trúng Cách [How Best to Convey a Problem]," *Phu Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 237 (1934): p.9-10.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1990): p.151.

<sup>3</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol 1*: p.157.

<sup>4</sup> As quoted in Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*: p.128.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, Chapter 3: "Daughters of Annam."

<sup>6</sup> Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1925-1945*.

liberation” (173).<sup>7</sup> In short, this period is widely regarded as the inauguration of collective consciousness for this group.

In this chapter, I seek to supplement the current scholarship by illuminating an alternative narrative heretofore overlooked, one that de-centers rather than contradicts the prevailing history. In writing the history of a “social group” and its liberationist politics, most of the current scholarship tends to take for granted that certain gender categories had already been congealed, presuming that there were no historical disagreements over the epistemic concepts that served as the binding glue to collective consciousness. In the early 1930s, I argue, some Vietnamese conceived of the gendered body as far more plastic and open to different modalities of becoming. One can attribute this new outlook, in part, to the rise of a more open-minded younger generation. In a milieu in which modern scientific innovation challenged conventional truisms,<sup>8</sup> this generation witnessed and experienced a profound crisis of knowledge and norms about the natural world, a crisis that, as we shall see, also subverted fundamental truths concerning the sexual body. This chapter aims to illumine this alternative narrative of normative crisis in sketching the perceived dynamism of gender and sexuality.

This study joins the work of both queer scholars and historians who interrogate the premises and power-making effects of certain historiographies that presume a heteronormative ideology. As I have explained in the dissertation’s preface, by “heteronormativity” queer scholars refer to the cultural, discursive and institutional means by which heterosexual dimorphism is naturalized: the principle of identity that produces a binary, stable and coherent alignment of anatomical sex, gender, desire and psyche. So powerful is this ideological fiction that it leads scholars to naturalize and reproduce it at the expense of diverse forms of sexual and gendered subjects in the narratives that they reconstruct of the gendered past. The “critical” dimension of “critical interruption” converges with queer historicisms that, according to Carla Freccero, “aim to open up sites of possibility effaced, if not foreclosed, by (hetero)normative historicisms” (81).<sup>9</sup> This kind of interrogation parallels recent critiques voiced by Vietnam and Southeast Asian historians Nhung Tuyet Tran and Anthony Reid. In “The Construction of Vietnamese Historical Identities,” they conclude their survey of the current scholarship with the following insight: “Most essays in this book are marked by an interest in crossing borders and exploring ambiguities. They seek to document voices that have been ignored or marginalized, whether those of women, subalterns, or cosmopolitan misfits.” They continue, “[T]heir interpretive frameworks leave more open ends, windows and adjoining corridors than previous work” (17).<sup>10</sup> As part of a dissertation examining the norms and normative limits of twentieth-

<sup>7</sup> McHale, “Printing and Power: Vietnamese Debates over Women’s Place in Society, 1918-1934.”: p. 173-94. Studies reconstructing a feminist history of this period likewise presume a stable gender referent. See Bui Tran Phuong, “Viet Nam 1918-1945, Genre Et Modernité -- Émergence De Nouvelles Perceptions Et Expérimentations,” Doctoral Dissertation Université Lumière Lyon 2, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Studying the publication of the adventures of the cartoon character Ly Toet, George Dutton writes that “Ly Toet’s encounters with city life revealed the **ambivalence of this new modernity**, including its physical dangers and its often abrupt departures from long-established patterns of daily life” (p.81, my emphasis). See George Dutton, “Ly Toet in the City: Coming to Terms with the Modern in 1930s Vietnam,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2.1 (2007):.p. 80-108.

<sup>9</sup> See Carla Freccero, *Queer/ Early/ Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Time of History and the Times of Gods” *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, eds. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (Durham: Duke University Press 1997), Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Nhung Tuyet Tran and Anthony Reid, “The Construction of Vietnamese Historical Identities,” *Viet Nam: Borderless Histories* eds. Nhung Tuyet Tran and Anthony Reid (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

century Vietnamese cultural life, this chapter investigates the formation of non-normative genders and sexualities that flourished during the period that scholars have long considered the genesis of the Vietnamese women's emancipation movement (1930-1940). In so doing, the dissertation aims to disrupt the conventional emplotment that collapses the history of modern gender emancipation into that of heterosexual dimorphism.<sup>11</sup>

Needless to say, the diverse characters revealed here in no way embody a representative sample and surely not a majority of the populace by any measure. That these characters are *marginal* underscores their usefulness in evaluating the limits of societal norms. In some sense, we shall be looking at a picture of society slightly refracted, focusing on the less noticed and aberrant, the strange and queer, and by extension, the *non*-representative. Cultural historians have already documented the tectonic shift that took place in this decade.<sup>12</sup> While indebted to this scholarship, even as it engages critically with them, this chapter teases out the effects of this shift on discourses of gender and sexuality. In particular, this dissertation demonstrates the contradictory ways in which scientific discourse enters Vietnamese modernity. On the one hand, as we shall see, science produces diagnostic categories that seek to normalize or pathologize non-normative sexual and gender expressions; on the other, literature becomes for some Vietnamese a counter-discourse to imagine sexual and gendered possibilities that defy and exceed these diagnostic categories. Attention to the literary dimensions of these documents will be crucial in understanding how the Vietnamese of this period pushed the imagined frontiers of the sexed and gendered body.

To demonstrate this expansion of bodily norms, the chapter will be divided into three main parts. The first part jump-starts the investigation with a prelude to the cultural and political context of Vietnam prior to the 1930s. Locating this period at the crossroads between two sexual traditions, I discuss the decline of the Reform movement led by the scholar-gentry and the rise of "radicalism" propagated by urban youth in the middle of the 1920s. This context helps to place the documents in historical perspective, allowing us to see both disjuncture and continuity of sexual practice and expression in the sources and, above all, to appreciate the profound novelty of the new bodily forms that exploded in the public discourse of the 1930s. Having provided this context, I then turn to an analysis of the primary sources which were published in the wake of these twin movements. I examine the legacy that the scholar-gentry bequeathed to posterity in the classical discourse of male friendship and gender crossing, showing how traces of this earlier tradition persisted well into the modern period. The third and final section demonstrates the wide variety of sexual subjectivities irreducible to a heterosexual regime that emerged in the modern discourse. Together, all three sections combine to support the overall argument that the normative meaning of gender and sexuality in this period was far more dynamic and expansive than contemporary scholarship has acknowledged.

### **I. The *Mise en Scène*: the Decline of the Scholar-Gentry and Rise of Urban Youth, 1926-1930**

The year 1926 represents a pivotal moment in the history of Vietnamese anti-colonialism in marking a decisive transition between two generations. The French had already occupied

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<sup>11</sup> On the idea of "critical interruption," see Lisa Rofel, "Discrepant Modernities and Their Discontents," *positions: east asia critique* 9.3 (2001).

<sup>12</sup> See Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1925-1945*, Nguyễn Văn Ký, *La Société Vietnamienne Face À La Modernité* Recherches Asiatiques, ed. Alain Forest (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995), Shawn McHale, "Printing, Power, and the Transformation of Vietnamese Culture, 1920-1945," Doctoral Dissertation, Cornell University, 1995, Judith A.N. Henchy, "Performing Modernity in the Writings of Nguyễn an Ninh and Phan Văn Hùm," Doctoral Dissertation, University of Washington, 2005, Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*.

Vietnam for more than sixty-five years. Some of the cultural and political figures of this first generation—Nguyen Thanh Hien, Phan Chu Trinh, Phan Boi Chau—held complex and at times ambivalent views towards the colonial state. Nguyen Thanh Hien, a southerner and student of the classics, agreed to work at one of the local colonial commissions, even as he was a staunch defender of the monarchy.<sup>13</sup> Others like Trinh, by contrast, recognized the bankruptcy of the monarchy and insisted on liberal reformist measures.<sup>14</sup> Still others like Phan Boi Chau rejected the dubious reformist argument and searched elsewhere for alternative frameworks, sojourning to East-Asian neighbors including Japan and China, where he was first exposed to the works, in translation, of Rousseau, Montesquieu and other Western political theorists. The story of this older generation, including its difficulty in adjusting to a changing world and its failure to locate an effective anti-colonial paradigm and organize a formidable resistance movement have been well-documented by other scholars.<sup>15</sup> In regards to their relevance to the question of gender and sexuality, this generation is significant in serving as a bridge to the East Asian classical tradition and its accompanying repertoire of sexual norms, discourses and worldviews. I will elaborate later on the specific elements of this nineteenth-century sexual tradition. For now, let us move to a discussion of the younger generation and its “radicalism.”

“Radicalism” is the label historians have conferred on a generation comprised of students, teachers, journalists and interpreters, among others. They were the product of the uneven growth of the colonial education system that replaced the traditional academies that trained candidates for the now defunct imperial Confucian exams. All such academies were officially closed by 1919.<sup>16</sup> It is no coincidence that by 1925, after the colonial state’s loosening of control over the freedoms of the press and of expression, public discourse included a profusion of publications of works by Western thinkers and writers, including Kant, Hegel, Marx, Bergson, Spinoza and Nietzsche.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, by the middle of the 1920s, students left for France in droves searching for an education they could not find at home. The story of their departure from and eventual return to Vietnam in the early 1930s has already been documented.<sup>18</sup> These students, exposed as they were to the cultural life of 1920s France, are noteworthy because their return coincides with the epistemic upheaval of early 1930s Vietnam when, as I argue, there was wider variety of sexual subjectivities than has been supposed.

This younger generation embodied and laid claim to a profound shift in values. Of the famous figures in this cohort, including Tran Huy Lieu, Phan Van Hum, Ta Thu Tau, Dao Duy Anh, perhaps the one that best exemplified this paradigm shift was Nguyen An Ninh. A French-educated lawyer who spent his formative years in Paris, Ninh returned to his country an iconoclast and staunch defender of individual autonomy. Having founded the satirical journal *La Cloche Fêlée*, he became something of a colonial gadfly: his persistent questioning of authority led to his arrest in March of 1926. Hue-Tam Ho-Tai has argued that, rather than the Communist Party, the “origins” of the Vietnamese revolution ought to be located in this generation, with its eclectic melding of anarchism and a quest for individual freedom. She writes, “Political radicalism and cultural iconoclasm fused together” when urban youths, “challenge[d] the

<sup>13</sup> See Ch. 4, p.94. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1925-1945*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p.271.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>16</sup> Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*:p.34

<sup>17</sup> Mark Philip Bradley, "Becoming *Van Minh*: Civilizational Discourse and Visions of the Self in Twentieth-Century Vietnam," *Journal of World History* 15.1 (2004): p.74.

<sup>18</sup> Scott McConnell, *Leftward Journey: The Education of Vietnamese Students in France, 1919-1939* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1989).

authority of their parents and teachers in a wave of strikes that gave them their first taste of control over their lives.” She continues, “Most of those who took part in the protests of 1926 were born after the turn of the century...they were the products of Sarraut’s [Indochinese Governor General’s] educational reforms.”<sup>19</sup> Whether manifested in their demands to break loose from the shackles of arranged marriages, insistence on romantic love, or fight for women’s emancipation, these urban youths exhibited a clear rupture with the older generation of scholar gentry.

Given the decline of this prior generation and rise of a younger one and given the spread of cultural iconoclasm in the context of the State’s loosening of the freedoms of the press and expression, it is no stretch of the imagination to claim that the early 1930s demonstrated a dramatic questioning of traditional sex/gender regimes, the emergence of diverse kinds of gendered and sexual subjectivities. To understand better this generational difference in sexual norms, let us turn to the first group of sources, which document the legacies that the scholar-gentry bequeathed to posterity.

## II. Traces of the Classical Tradition: Male Friendship and Gender-Crossing

Scholarship on pre-modern China includes a vast body of evidence of the ubiquity of male homosexuality. Scholars have unearthed a rich corpus of ancient texts showing the vitality of same-sex relations that were quite different from their modern configuration.<sup>20</sup> Further, if nineteenth-century “Vietnam” was part of a larger Chinese cosmology, as some scholars aver,<sup>21</sup> one can probably draw cross-regional generalizations. Brett Hinsch has demonstrated a thriving classical “homosexual tradition” prior to China’s encounter with the West; there may have also been a classical Vietnamese culture that allowed if not promoted male same-sex relations. Surviving traces of this culture in the discourse of male friendship and gender-crossing date back to as early as 1929. Due to the dominance of patriarchy in this pre-modern tradition, the question of female same-sex relations poses a different historical challenge of recuperation in that few women writers existed, and by extension, few documents written directly by them are available; however, as we shall see later, retrospective reports of premodern women, often dressed as men, who defied the patriarchal order would later surface in 1930s documents.

### *Male Friendship*

The Chinese classical discourse of male friendship (*ban tri am*) existed in pre-modern Vietnam and endured through the French colonial period, albeit in translation. The *Vietnamese-English Dictionary* published by the National Institute of Linguistics defines the concept *ban tri am* as: “Friends who fully understand each other; bosom friends” (759).<sup>22</sup> That concept reveals an even more provocative history: “friend” (*ban*); “knowledge” (*tri*) and “music” (*am*). This history can be traced to the story of Boya and Zhong Ziqi found in the Chinese Warring States book *Leizi* during the period of the Springs and Autumns of Lu (722 BC and 481 BC). Boya is a masterful musician, Zhong Ziqi, a listener. The latter is able to understand the former through his

<sup>19</sup> Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*: p.146.

<sup>20</sup> Bret Hinsch, *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China* (Berkeley: University of California 1990), Vivien Ng, “Homosexuality and the State in Late Imperial China,” *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, eds. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus and Jr. George Chauncey (New York: Meridian, 1990), Tze-Ian D. Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China*, *Worlds of Desire: Chicago Series on Sexuality, Gender and Culture*, ed. Gilbert Herdt (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> Liam C. Kelley, ““Confucianism” In Vietnam: A State of the Field Essay,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1.1-2 (2006).

<sup>22</sup> Đặng Chân Liêu, Lê Kha Kế and Phạm Duy Trọng, *Từ Điển Việt-Anh [Vietnamese-English Dictionary]*, ed. Hoàng Mai (Ho Chí Minh: Nhà Xuất Bản Hồ Chí Minh [Ho Chi Minh Publishing House], 2000).

music. As Boya played his zither and contemplated the nearby mountain, Zhong Ziqi was able to grasp his friend's thoughts. When Zhong Ziqi died, as the story goes, the musician ceased to play the instrument because there was no one left to understand his music, and by extension, his thoughts.<sup>23</sup>

Although this tradition hails from the pre-modern period in China, the term itself travels and surfaces in classical and modern Vietnamese literate culture. Whereas the term originally referred only to male relations, its meaning has now expanded. The *Tale of Kieu*, for example, invokes this concept in the episode where the eponymous heroine meets her lover Kim Trong for the first time. She states, "Wind's held me up, rain's kept me back—I've hurt **your** [*tri-am*] feelings much against my wish" ("Gió bắt mưa cầm,/ đã cam tộ với **tri-âm** bấy chầy") (p.21; line 386).<sup>24</sup> This concept surfaces again in another context related to this epic poem. In his memoir the *Poulo Condore Archipelago before March 9, 1945*, Tran Van Que notes that, to ease their confinement in this island, the prisoners read the *Tale of Kieu* and invoked this classical idea of friendship. Que writes, "Kieu was the prisoners' **soul mate**. As talented and exemplary as she is, Kieu also had to go through many ups and downs, just like themselves!" ("Kiêu là bạn **tri-âm** của họ. Nàng Kiêu tài hoa rất mực mà phải bầy nổi ba chìm thì có khác chi họ"; p.130).<sup>25</sup> Another article published in one of the first women's journals *Nu Gioi Chung* (Women's Bell) employed this term to refer to the lover of the pre-modern Chinese heroine Manh Le Quan, known for having disguised herself as a man to pass the imperial exams.<sup>26</sup> In the modern period, Madame Nguyen Duc Nhuan named the title of one her editorials, "A Letter from a Soul Mate" (Bức Thư **Tri Kỳ**),<sup>27</sup> referring to the intimate nature of the letter to her readers, even though its topic was mostly about the daily difficulties of running a periodical. Nguyen Thi Kiem invokes this term to defend the social and cultural role of women. Whether as wives or mistresses, women were a benefit to renowned writers including J.S. Mill, Alphonse de Lamartine and Alfred de Musset. Behind each man, she implies, was a woman—a "kindred spirit" (*ban tri am* or *ban tri ky*)—without whom he would have not succeeded (p.32).<sup>28</sup> The idea was also used casually in newspapers by people placing personal ads, a relatively strange and novel concept for the time. One news ad advised, "Find your *tri ky* in the Red Silk Column [Sợi Tơ Hồng]."<sup>29</sup> As late as 1939, in an article promoting monogamous marriage as the solution to rampant venereal diseases, one writer invoked the term to refer to amorous heterosexual

<sup>23</sup> I am grateful to Nguyen Nguyet Cam who first pointed this concept out to me and to my colleague Eileen Vo who helped contact Professor Bruce Rusk, Assistant Professor of Chinese Literature, and Ding Xiang Warner, Associate Professor of Chinese Literature, both in the Department of Asian Studies at Cornell University, who in turn helped clarify the history of this term. See also footnote 31 in Chapter 2 of Ding Xiang Warner, *A Wild Deer Amid Soaring Phoenixes: The Opposition Poetics of Wang Ji* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 2003), Anna M. Shields, "The Limits of Knowledge: Three Han Yu Letters to Friends, 799-802," *T'ang Studies* 22 (2004), Kenneth J. DeWoskin, *A Song for One or Two: Music and the Concept of Art in Early China* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies: University of Michigan, 1982).

<sup>24</sup> Nguyen Du, *The Tale of Kieu*, trans. Huynh Sanh Thong, Bilingual Edition ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

<sup>25</sup> Trần Văn Quế, *Côn Lôn Quần Đảo Trước Ngày 9-3-1945 (the Poulo Condore Archipelago before March 9, 1945)* (Saigon: Thanh Hương Tùng Thơ, 1961).

<sup>26</sup> Nguyễn Thị Bồng, "Chuyện Nàng Mạnh Quan (the Story of Manh Quan)," *Nữ Giới Chung* 18 (1918).

<sup>27</sup> Nguyễn Đức Nhuận, "Bức Thư Tri Kỳ [a Letter from a Soulmate]," *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 89 (1931).

<sup>28</sup> Nguyen Thi Kiem, "Cô Nguyễn Thị Kiêm Nói Về Vấn Đề Nữ Lưu Và Văn Học [Ms. Nguyen Thi Kiem Speaks About the Question of Women and Literature]," *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn [New Women's Journal]*.131 (1932).

<sup>29</sup> [NoAuthor], "Tìm Tri Kỳ Trong Mực Sợi Tơ Hồng (Finding a Soulmate in the Red Silk Column)," *Báo Loa (The Loudspeaker)* 91 (1935).

relations.<sup>30</sup> Hence, despite its origin in describing male scholarly friendship, the idea of *ban tri am* (or *ban tri ky*) took on a variety of connotations over time and circulated as a popular coinage. Whether used to describe male friendships, men's mistresses, serial monogamy, or pre-modern and modern romances, one common denominator persisted: a deep bond between the two parties involved.

### *Gender Crossing*

Examining the literary and cultural journals of early twentieth century Vietnam, I observed, besides a wide variety of French writers, the presence of a prior set of classical authors. Hailing from the Chinese tradition, the T'ang poets Khuat Nguyen [Qu Yuán], Do Phu [Du Fu], and Bach Cu Di [Bó Juyì] represented an influential but declining tradition. Written in Sino Vietnamese, their works had to be translated into the vernacular for a younger generation trained in Franco-Vietnamese schools. As alluded to earlier, the deliberate effacement of the Mandarin system and its replacement by the French one succeeded in severing, at both the level of language and cosmology, the ties of this younger generation to its forefathers. In the early 1930s, however, there were traces of this generation in decline, the remnants of a prior world and its attendant attitudes toward gender and sexuality.

In classical literate culture, it was commonplace for male authors to assume feminine personae. In an article entitled "The Rebuttal of Mr. Thê Phung on the Question of Women and Literature" (1929) published in the *New Women's News*, the author claims that women are somehow innately incapable of producing great works of literature.<sup>31</sup> Although his claim is unacceptably misogynistic, the author's justification is illuminating in revealing something of the sexual norms of this earlier generation:

The male poet has to impersonate being a woman [*giả một người đàn bà*] in order to speak of himself. To do otherwise would be, first of all, impertinent [*trơ trẽn*] behavior and a deprivation of pleasure [*một thú*]. Second, we cannot expect strong talented men [*trượng phu hào kiệt*] such as Mr. Khuat Nguyen [Qu Yuán], Do Phu [Du Fu], and Bach Cu Di [Bó Juyì] to be lamenting and sobbing. If they lose their appearance [*mất cái vẻ*] as strong talented men [*trượng phu hào kiệt*], nobody would pity them, and so they naturally must entrust [*ký thác vào*] women with this role, because when women sob and lament, there is grace and charm, which makes it easier for people to feel pity [*tôi nghiệp, xót thương*].

The passage is a response to Phan Khoi, the father of the New Poetry, who asserted that women should be allowed to produce literature because they could then reflect more mimetically their own sentiments and, in so doing, exceed their predecessors, the prior male T'ang poets. One could dismiss Mr. Phung's response as simply a chauvinist alibi; or one could, on the other hand, mine it for clues to prevailing norms of gender and sexuality.

In particular, the author considers female impersonation to be both welcome and expected.<sup>32</sup> Since poetry is about illusion, semblance and creation [*tạo hóa*], according to this

<sup>30</sup> VK, "Thành Duyên Đôi Lứa Cũng Là Phương Pháp Phòng Bà Trị Bệnh (Matching People up as a Couple Is One Technique to Reduce Disease)," *Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal]* 221 (1939).

<sup>31</sup> Thê Phụng, "Bài Phản Đối Của Ông Thê Phụng [a Rebuttal by Mr. The Phung]," *Phu Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 6 (1929).

<sup>32</sup> In 1913 Mr. Nguyen Van Vinh, journalist and translator of Western texts, assumed the feminine pen-name Dao Thi Loan to criticize the women's movement. See Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*. For the contradictions in Nguyen Van Vinh's colonial identity, see Christopher Goscha, "'The Modern Barbarian': Nguyen Van Vinh and the Complexity of Colonial Modernity in Vietnam," *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 3.1 (2004).

author, performance in drag is part and parcel of poetic production. Mr. Phung has us consider the case of theatre and asks, rhetorically, what would be its point if people saw on stage real people perform their “real” selves? “If a real ‘exquisite woman’ [*giai nhân thiêt*],” he explains, “came to talk to me...she would be most **unpleasant** to my ear, and I would be wholly **untouched**” [*nghe có khoái tai, động lòng đâu*]. He continues: “But if the ‘exquisite woman Do Phu [Du Fu]’ opens his mouth, he would immediately stir in me pity and compassion [*ngâm ngùi*].” According to the author’s logic, having “real” women—however “real” may be defined—convey their own sentiments would deprive the presumptively male reader of pleasure. But if the actress in question is not a “real” woman, what precisely is the object of Mr. Phung’s desire? Is the pleasure the result of the actor’s theatrical talent? Or the cultural fantasy of the image of the delicate woman? Or Do Phu’s adept performance in drag? Or a proto-homoeroticism?

Whatever the case, the logic of the cultural argument is quite contradictory. Suppose that the pleasure by Mr. Phung and like male audiences were a direct response to the actor’s talent. In the latter case, the norms of heterosexuality would be sustained, forestalling the charge of implied homoeroticism. But it would also follow that the gender of the performer is moot. Any talented actress could also be a source of pleasure. Indeed either men or women could perform this role, and the pleasure would stem from whoever best approximates the *fantasy* of the feminine ideal. But women cannot be engaged in articulating this ideal. The author’s logic denies women this role because only men can undertake the performance. Otherwise, the author would equally encourage male impersonation-- the performance of male characters by women. For the latter would also be a form of artistic semblance. But the author does not. Instead, when they are not performing their role as “strong talented men,” they can appropriate—and hence impersonate—the symbolic cultural repertoire of femininity. But the converse is not true. In the classical world of letters, only men could transgress gender boundaries, and it was between and among men who desired each other and their gender-crossing enactments.

The use of the feminine as a figure for various political guises is not culturally singular. Feminist critics in the West have long criticized this appropriation, and I have attempted above to acknowledge this history of women’s exclusion. It is also crucial to note that feminist and queer theorists alike have challenged the premise that femininity and masculinity are the essential and proper expressions emanating naturally from the binary sexes respectively.<sup>33</sup> Female sex need not “express” an essential “femininity,” just as “masculinity” need not flow naturally from male sex. There is no logical reason for either except an arbitrary, though no less powerful, cultural apparatus that insists on a unity between sex, gender, practice and desire. If femininity is not an essential attribute emanating from woman per se, we can interpret Mr. Phung’s commentary as an instance of a cultural construction of male femininity. Just as queer scholars have constructed cultural histories of “masculinities without men,” so the prior passage exemplifies a case of “femininity without women.” This interpretation may sound strange to those who still subscribe to essentialist paradigms. But the idea may seem less so and more plausible, indeed warranted, if we remember that the author, after all, banishes women from the domain of cultural production. The femininity that Mr. Phung desires is, in his own terms, without “real” women. In this context, to “cross gender”—to enact the passage from masculinity to femininity or vice versa—is

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<sup>33</sup> See Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), Jean Bobby Noble, *Masculinities without Men?: Female Masculinity in Twentieth Century Fictions* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2003).

not necessarily the same as cross-sex identification. To the extent that one maintains the binary sex distinction at all, “cross gender” differs from “cross sex” identification in referring to the passage from one symbolic meaning of gender to another, even though “men,” here understood as “sexed,” actually monopolize both. It is possible that the normative apparatus that produces uniformity between sex and gender, that designates a discrete gender for each sex, has not yet fully formed. If it did, men would not “cross gender” with impunity. Alternatively, it is equally plausible that the culture has permitted an exceptional space for these gender-crossing practices. Regardless of how one explains this phenomenon, my point is still the same. In 1929 some men could still assume feminine personae and express desire for each other, albeit in an ambivalent and circuitous way.

This interpretation, however, could be disputed by insisting that Mr. Phung reveals mostly “empathy”—not desire. In the absence of explicit sexual rhetoric, this criticism may seem justified in its skepticism. The appearance of the male actress—the “exquisite woman Do Phu”—stirs in Mr. Phung not lust but merely “compassion and pity.” Here “empathy” is probably understood to mean the “identification with and understanding of another’s situation.”<sup>34</sup> But this reading assumes an overly restrictive definition of “desire.” The objection would have to presuppose a theory for the conceptual distinction between desire and empathy or, in a slightly different vocabulary, between eros and identification. Psychoanalysis has a critical account of this relationship, claiming that identification and desire are inversely related to each other: one cannot, at once, identify with the other and wish to have the other because in the Freudian schema, desire for one sex is secured through the identification with the other, thereby instituting heterosexuality. This criticism unwittingly supports, then, a conservative law in Freud’s theory. Freud’s *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* was published in 1921; it is no surprise that by the 1930s this theory had reached the colony and was actively debated by Vietnamese writers,<sup>35</sup> and so the invocation of Freud’s conceptual distinction is not altogether unwarranted. Queer scholars, such as Diana Fuss, have pointed to the unstable character of Freud’s theory and have contested it within Freud’s own terms. In some accounts, “identification,” understood as the psychological internalization of the other, becomes the substitute for the lost libidinal object into the ego.<sup>36</sup> We ought to recall that Mr. Phung is, in some sense, *mourning* the loss of his male actresses within the cultural context of the rise of the women’s liberation movement. “Real” women are shattering this man’s fantasy and, in the process, he is psychologically incorporating his lost love-objects—the declining world of classical male scholars. Hence, for those who take psychoanalysis seriously, the faculties of empathy and desire are not, of necessity, conceptually distinct.

But even if one steers clear of psychoanalysis and take a simply semantic perspective, the above criticism still relies on a narrow definition of “desire.” Whereas some critics wish to limit the concept to its sexual meaning, one could allow for a slightly more expansive view encompassing a complex range of eroticisms. As scholar Tze-Ian Sang has noted, “desire” can refer to: “longing, idealization, infatuation, worship, attachment, protectiveness, jealousy,

<sup>34</sup> American Heritage Dictionary. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002).

<sup>35</sup> See: XX, “Triết Học Và Đời Người, Phần 1 [Philosophy and Life, Part 1],” Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News) 209 (1933), XX, “Triết Học Và Đời Người, Phần 2 (Philosophy and Life, Part 2),” Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News) 210 (1933), XX, “Triết Học Và Đời Người, Phần 3 (Philosophy and Life, Part 3),” Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News) 211 (1933).

<sup>36</sup> See Diana Fuss, Identification Papers (New York: Routledge, 1995), Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, The Shell and the Kernel, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994).

passion to physical sex in various forms” (34).<sup>37</sup> If the meaning of “desire” is limited too narrowly, it obscures polyvalent connotations throughout history, which, I venture to say, many of us would surely not support. With this more capacious definition, I underscore once again the point already made above—that Mr. Phung derives some sense of *pleasure* in his empathetic feelings towards male actresses and, as he himself confesses, finds the presence of real women “most unpleasant.” The prior objection discounts Mr. Phung’s differential attitude towards men and women performers, flattening the historical notion of desire and extinguishing it of all cultural life and texture. Above all, this objection forgets the rallying cry that Foucault once invoked against the hegemony of sex: the multiplicity of bodies and pleasures.<sup>38</sup> Might Mr. Phung’s pleasure be one form that desire takes outside of—and prior to—the institutionalized formation of sexuality?

Finally, even if we were to grant the distinction between empathy and desire, we can still point to historical studies of “homosexuality” in the East Asian classical tradition that lend further weight to our interpretation. Leupp writes, “There seems to be evidence for homosexual relationships involving such poets and scholars as Li Bo (d.762), Bo Juyi (772-846), Su Dongpo (1036-1102), and others in the Tang (618-907).” By the Qing period (1644-1912), Leupp explains, there arose the term *Hanlin feng*—the “tendency of the academicians”—to designate the phenomenon of “male-male sexuality” (p.14).<sup>39</sup> Given this “homosexual” tendency among Chinese poets and scholars, it would be no surprise that Mr. Phung absorbed this cultural tolerance if not more overt acceptance of male-male desire. Indeed, Mr. Phung’s attitude parallels those seen in nineteenth-century China where one could find traces of amorous relations between male literati patrons and boy actors who specialized in female roles. In the late Qing period (1892-1922), high-end female prostitution was prohibited, but Court officials patronized male brothels where youths, brought in from the surrounding region, made their bodies as “feminine” as possible (p.16).<sup>40</sup> “Female impersonation,” Leupp states, “were in greatest demand, the most attractive becoming the objects of universal worship” (p.16).<sup>41</sup> Tze-Ian D. Sang attributed “innocence” to the nineteenth-century writings of Chen Sen who exalted these relations. Sang explains that Chen created two kinds of relations between male literati and boy actors: “The elegant type is animated by obsessional sentimentality and nonphysical erotic love, whereas the clownish type is characterized by naked lust and monetary exchange” (p.290-1). In both cases, whether physical or not, there is an erotic dimension to the relationship beyond mere “empathy.” In regards to Mr. Phung, the comparison is not unwarranted given that the objects of his “pleasure,” as we have emphasized, are male actresses within the Chinese scholarly tradition. That Mr. Phung’s writing appears as late as 1929 in Vietnam coincides with the nascent cultural debate encouraging women to join the theatrical stage<sup>42</sup> and further reflects the temporal lag in the development of the Vietnamese modern vernacular.<sup>43</sup> Hence, cross-regional evidence would

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<sup>37</sup> Sang, The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China.

<sup>38</sup> Foucault, History of Sexuality, Vol 1.

<sup>39</sup> Gary P. Leupp, Male Colors: The Construction of Homosexuality in Tokugawa Japan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> [NoAuthor], “Phụ Nữ Với Việc Diễn Kịch (Women and the Theatrical Stage),” Phụ nữ thời đàm (Women, Current Events, Commentary) 46 (1931), NVB, “Tại Sao Phụ Nữ Ta Chưa Dám Ra Diễn Kịch (Why Our Women Still Dare Not Act on Stage),” Phụ nữ thời đàm (Women, Current Events, Commentary) (1931).

<sup>43</sup> See Marr, Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1925-1945: p.161-167.

suggest that Mr. Phung's relation towards male actresses cannot be reduced to mere "empathy" and read as an extinguishing of all traces of homoeroticism.

This interpretation is consistent with Peter Zinoman's findings of a homoerotic impulse in some revolutionary prison memoirs. Evidence of this impulse, in particular, appears in the writings of Tran Huy Lieu, Nguyen Van Que and Nguyen Duc Chinh.<sup>44</sup> Of the three, I wish to focus on the latter and his publication of "Letters from Poulo Condore."<sup>45</sup> The other two sources would also be relevant, but because they are each written during different historical periods spanning several decades, Lieu's in 1950 and Que's in 1961, they pose certain interpretive obstacles. By contrast, published in 1937, the "Letters from Poulo Condore" best illustrates the issue, revealing Nguyen Duc Chinh's experience of confinement in the French prison between 1930 and 1935.<sup>46</sup> As Zinoman has noted, Chinh discloses his homoerotic attraction to another prison actor, a certain inmate named "Tho," who performs in a modern imitation of *La dame aux camelias*. In describing this inmate, Chinh writes:

In the play performed this Tet, there was a brothel and the young girls who work there hug their "guests" and dance with them. If I had known before that Tho was to play a prostitute, I would have volunteered immediately to take the part of the libertine youth [*cong tu*]. That way, I could have hugged the one to whom everyone's been writing letters this year—the one about whom we often joke: 'If there was a flower garden in the prison, I would risk several days of punishment in the hole to pluck a flower and present it to her.'<sup>47</sup>

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Ngoài buổi kịch tây, anh còn tổ chức một buổi hát cải lương... trong đó có một cảnh nhà điếm, chị em với khách chơi, ôm nhau nhẩy đầm. Minh mà biết trước Thọ đóng gái điếm thì mình cũng làm một vai công-tử cho xong: để được ôm cái người mà năm xưa ai đã đưa thư, lại ai nữa đã nói đùa: 'Nếu trong banh có vườn hoa, tôi sẽ xin hy-sinh mấy ngày hằm ngắt một bông để tặng cô.'<sup>48</sup>

As Zinoman has explained, the homoeroticism in the passage is implicit. To reiterate, "Tho" is generally recognized as a man's name; there is no evidence that female prisoners performed in theatrical roles; and, women convicts were no longer sent to Poulo Condore after 1910.<sup>49</sup> Yet, despite the homoeroticism, the language in this passage discloses little sense of internalized guilt or shame. The preface indicates that the letters were primarily addressed to Chinh's younger brother who, in the course of the correspondence, we learn is about to get married. I write "primarily" because at times Chinh also addresses other friends or family members in the same letter, scolding some or congratulating others, thereby implying the letter's general accessibility.<sup>50</sup> Had the collection of missives been strictly personal with no other intended audience, it may be more difficult to draw inferences about collective norms. In this case, however, the prior passage is addressed to Tran Huy Lieu as a part of an on-going dialog

<sup>44</sup> See Peter Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). p.126-131.

<sup>45</sup> Nguyễn Đức Chính, *Thư Côn Lô (Letters from Poulo Condore)* (Hanoi: Trinh Van Bich 1937): p.30.

<sup>46</sup> On page 32, in one of the letters dated September 2, 1935, Chinh reveals that the date marks his fifth year of imprisonment.

<sup>47</sup> As translated in Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862-1940*: p.128.

<sup>48</sup> Chính, *Thư Côn Lô (Letters from Poulo Condore)*: p.30.

<sup>49</sup> See Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862-1940*: p.128.

<sup>50</sup> See "Letters from Poulo Condore," page 17: Chinh at once addresses other family members and congratulates his younger brother on the anticipated wedding.

presupposing tacit cultural values and conventions, addressed minimally to another man. Now, as already noted, in a 1950 prison memoir, Tran Huy Lieu also disclosed his attraction towards a certain cross-dressing actor.<sup>51</sup>

Although I do not examine that text here, I want to point to the fact that Tran Huy Lieu is Chinh's audience in *this* letter, thus suggesting a shared if not culturally acceptable kind of homoerotic desire. Further, the fact that this collection of missives was published two years afterward by Chinh's younger brother evinces their public character: if they were acceptable enough for him to display to the public eye, they probably posed little risk of embarrassment to the parties in question and, most important, to the family name. The unabashed, almost naïve, manner in which Chinh displays his desire parallels that of Mr. Phung who, like the former, actively excluded "real" women from his notion of artistic sociality. Both men suggest the historical and cultural acceptance of, at most, same-sex desire and, at the least, cross-gender performances.

One might object, however, that these cases are so dissimilar that they cannot be compared. Whereas Mr. Phung wrote within the context of a societal debate, Chinh wrote within the repressive confines of a French prison. Far from friends and surrounded by only men, Chinh had no other choice but to be attracted to a cross-dressing inmate. In this view, the homoerotic attraction is circumstantial, merely an exceptional case to an otherwise heterosexual predisposition. In the absence of "real" women, Chinh's desire was merely a manifestation of a repressed appetite for the opposite sex, whatever its form. But even if Chinh's desire can be explained away by a claim of "circumstantial homosexuality," as some believe, the explanation in no way challenges our central argument;<sup>52</sup> the prison environment would, on the contrary, strengthen my claim in serving as a better test case of the limits of societal norms. If homosexual relations are more likely in an all-male prison and if homophobia were a pervasive and powerful norm, then the norm would presumably manifest itself in some manner, acting as a countervailing power regulating the men's conduct, behavior, psyche and bodies. Yet, as Zinoman has noted, Nguyen Van Que's memoir reveals with candor the visible presence of intense sexual bonds between older and younger prison inmates, bonds that were embedded in the complex prison hierarchy.<sup>53</sup> Although that memoir was published in 1961, making it difficult to ascertain the social norms of an earlier era, the piece does confirm that these homosexual relations may have taken place in greater numbers than some may wish to fathom. The precise modality of power is beside the point. Whether conceived as juridical or productive—and scholars have questioned the distinction altogether<sup>54</sup>—any form of "power" worthy of the name ought to be able to bring about regulatory effects. In regards to Chinh's memoir, it is known that many other inmates, like the author himself, demonstrated overt sexual interest in the male actress, appearing as the subject of many letters by admirers willing to pluck garden flowers on "her" behalf. Hence, even if all the prison inmates were "heterosexual," in no way do they appear unduly conscious about deviating from their so-called "normal" desires, regardless of the homoerotic subtext. The evidence, therefore, would call into question the power of any existing

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<sup>51</sup> Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862-1940.*: p.127-8.

<sup>52</sup> Nguyen Quoc Vinh writes: "But this instance can arguably be discounted as circumstantial in view of the short supply, if not altogether the lack, of actual women to serve as objects of desire on the one hand, and to play female roles in prison theatrical productions on the other" (p.4). Vinh, "Deviant Bodies and Dynamics of Displacement of Homoerotic Desire in Vietnamese Literature from and About the French Colonial Period (1858-1954)."

<sup>53</sup> See Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862-1940.*: p.129.

<sup>54</sup> Judith Butler, "Sexual Inversions," *Foucault and the Critique of Institutions*, eds. John Caputo and Mark Yount (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).

homophobic norms and point, instead, to the opposite: a far more relaxed attitude towards gender and sexual variance.

An argument could still be made, however, that this attitude can be explained away by considering heterosexuality as a mere façade. It may well be difficult to defend the claim that Chinh's relation with the cross-dresser is "heterosexual"—at least, not in the conventional sense—because Chinh is aware that his sexual object choice is, in some sense, also a man. One could claim, however, that the *façade* of heterosexuality is what makes possible homosexual desire. In this view, Chinh's relation to the cross-dresser is, in effect, a "dynamics of displacement" of covert homosexual expression. This is the argument advanced by Nguyen Quoc Vinh.<sup>55</sup> Homosexuality can come out of the "closet," so to speak, only because it is displaced by "manifold" layers of permissible substitutions, one of which is the "transvestite body." The implied point here is that since the ambiguity of the transvestite helps to masquerade the relation as heterosexual, homosexual desire, lurking in the shadows, can now reach the light of day, making its presence albeit circuitously. But why must "homosexual desire" be cloaked in "manifold" layers if it did not already exhibit some form of social deviancy? For Vinh, homoerotic desire is relegated to the "discursive spaces of marginality, silence, confusion, and Otherness" (9). Although this kind of claim is understandable given the painful history of homophobia,<sup>56</sup> its transhistorical premises ought to stand up to critical scrutiny.

Here the distinction between "homosocial" and "homosexual" desire may be useful in thinking through the interpretive problem. In her study of mid-eighteenth and nineteenth century European literature, Eve Sedgwick explains that male "homo-social" desire is not the same as a homosexual one; the former can and has been complicit with homophobia. Used to describe the social bonds between same-sex persons, the term "homo-social" is "meant to be distinguished from 'homosexual,' which may...be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality" (1). This distinction reaches its height in Europe in the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and not until the gay rights movement, Sedgwick writes, did one see "only more and more clearly the mutual distinctness of the aristocratic-style, ascriptively feminine, 'tragic,' and affluent or apolitical male homosexual stereotype on the one hand, and on the other, the actively, projectively homophobic mass culture **founded on male bonds** very similar to the ones it criminalized and glamorized in him" (217, my emphasis). For Sedgwick, "homosocial" bonds can be actively present but not necessarily "homosexual" desire because the former requires the constitutive exclusion of the latter for its self-constitution. Thus, one ought to avoid conflating these analytical distinctions lest we ascribe to homosexuality the very socio-historical mechanisms that promote and maintain its obverse: homophobia.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Nguyen Quoc Vinh writes that Chinh's homosexual desire is displaced by manifold layers: the "prison on a distant offshore island;" "idyllic realm...in the imagination;" and "transvestite body" (4). I have attempted to explain away the first two "displacements": the prison environment and the imagined (versus "real") status of homosexual desire. See Vinh, "Deviant Bodies and Dynamics of Displacement of Homoerotic Desire in Vietnamese Literature from and About the French Colonial Period (1858-1954)."

<sup>56</sup> For cases of homophobia, see Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus and Jr. George Chauncey, eds., Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past (New York: New American Library, 1989).

<sup>57</sup> Society's most heinous problems, it seems, are often imputed to homosexuals. Whether coming from the political left or right, homosexuals are almost always the putative source of society's ills. In *Nationalism and Sexuality*, George Mosse has astutely noted, "The relationship between respectability and socialism seems to demonstrate how effective respectability had penetrated all classes of the population. Those considered abnormal by society could expect no help from the proletariat." He continues, "It is not surprising, therefore, that left-wing anti-fascists used the accusation of homosexuality against the National Socialists, just as the Nazis themselves prosecuted internal enemies" (p.185-6). George L. Mosse, Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle Class Morality and Sexual Norms in

That is why some queer scholars working on the past tend to avoid the homo- and heterosexual distinction. In his study of Balzac's sociological forms of sexuality, for instance, Michael Lucey notes, "[I]n order to grasp Balzac's understanding of sexuality it will not help to consider homosexuality as a sexual-identity category that is in opposition to heterosexuality (those terms themselves being anything but sociologically self-evident)." He continues, "Such a categorical division (itself a product of a certain history) is not sufficiently supple nor sufficiently universal to allow one to grasp the relation between sexuality and habitus in all times and all places" (xxix).<sup>58</sup> Given these problematic distinctions, then, the issue with Vinh's argument is that he is not historical enough. Is it unreasonable to point out that the mechanism of the "dynamics of displacement" from "1858 to 1954"—almost a century of change—strikes some readers as ahistorical? If it would take 200 sources for some readers to be reasonably persuaded by an argument about change over a ten-year period—a claim, by the way, which is *not* the central argument of this chapter—how many sources would be needed for a study making a claim over a span of a century? Hence, Vinh's argument, path breaking as it is, should be supplemented with further historical work that examines more precisely the potentially shifting norms that govern gender and sexuality throughout the century in question.

In what follows, however, I do not make any claims about the entire century which Vinh ambitiously set out to examine. Nor am I interested in what the majority of people may have believed. Rather, I am focusing my study on the shifting sexual norms among primarily urban and literate Vietnamese elites. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, as today, much of Vietnam was agricultural. So the issue of women's education and morality, as Hue-Tam Ho-Tai acknowledges, concerned "only a tiny minority of women" and the vigorous debates centered on the "development of a new Western-educated elite and the role of women in that elite" (97).<sup>59</sup> Explaining the link between the rise of the modern vernacular and spread of nationalism in this period, Benedict Anderson observes, "For even if only 10 percent of the Vietnamese-speaking population was literate by the late 1930s, this was a proportion unprecedented in the history of this people" (128).<sup>60</sup> To acknowledge this bias, then, is not to underestimate the decisive role of the elite to the nation's tumultuous fate in the twentieth-century, but only to be forthright about the scope of the research. For better or worse, I advance a modest claim about the expanded limits of sexual norms within this group during a brief historical period.

As I have hopefully demonstrated, the discourse of male friendship in the classical tradition endured through the French colonial era. This classical discourse provides some indication that men's desire for each other was not entirely suppressed, if at all, illustrating a viable form in which such relations could be organized. Further, as noted, those male relations could, historically, have been sexual in nature and hence conceptually distinct from the modern kind of "male bonds" founded on homophobia. Finally, this discourse did not and could not remain isolated in the declining world of mandarin scholars, but evolved and traveled to other segments of society; in short, one did not have to be a "mandarin"—or even a man—to assimilate the discourse. Hence, "same-sex desire" could conceivably have enjoyed the public

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Modern Europe (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985). For a study of how homosexuals supported the Resistance during Vichy France, see Julian Jackson, "Homosexuality, Collaboration and Resistance in Occupied France," Contemporary French Civilization 31.2 (2007).

<sup>58</sup> Michael Lucey, "Preface," The Misfit of the Family: Balzac and the Social Forms of Sexuality, eds. Michèle Barale, Jonathan Goldberg and Michael Moon (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>59</sup> Tai, Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution.

<sup>60</sup> Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (London: Verso, 1991).

limelight and need not have lurked in the shadows, making its appearance in the guise of heterosexuality. The fact that “same-sex desire” assumes another form in varying contexts, e.g. male friendship, merely implies that it is intertwined with other cultural formations and that its distinctively modern configuration—as mutual, egalitarian and psychosocially unified—may not have yet emerged as a discrete historical entity.<sup>61</sup> That does not mean, however, that same-sex desire was considered outright “deviant” and worthy of social opprobrium. If so, one cannot discount the homoerotic impulse in Chinh’s letter, as some believe; we can, if we wish, describe the relation as ambiguous or a complex composite of desires, but it would be a mistake to call the relation a “displacement” or a heterosexual façade.

In the context of the early 1930s, the binary opposition between hetero- and homosexuality had not yet achieved hegemonic status. Vietnam’s rapidly modernizing urban centers were altering even as it was introducing novel forms of living. In the next section, we shall examine these novel forms of sexual and gendered life that arose simultaneously with the advent of modernization under French colonialism, but forms that the present scholarly literature has overlooked.

### III. New Bodies and Genders under French Colonialism

The relentless penetration of modern ways of life characterized by technological and scientific advances led the Vietnamese to examine fundamental questions about their society. Unlike Europe and the United States, where economic and cultural development generally grew at a steady pace, other regions around the globe including Southeast Asia encountered the onslaught of modernity with a profound sense of disorientation. In his analysis of the double-consciousness of the colonized intelligentsia, Pheng Cheah explains that their social situation endows them with the “gift/curse” to perceive much earlier the technological forces that “destabilize and change human consciousness” (p.12).<sup>62</sup> Likewise, explaining the response of Vietnamese colonial poets and writers, Neil Jamieson likens it to the “emotional experiences of going from Rousseau to Camus in a single lifetime” (82).<sup>63</sup> For this reason, Judith Henchy describes this period as one of “rapid transition” (p.208)<sup>64</sup>; Shawn McHale calls it a “moral and epistemological chaos” resulting in a “fragmented sense of identity among the men and women members of the élite” (193).<sup>65</sup> In short, scholars agree that the early 1930s was marked by an epistemic upheaval—a world in perpetual motion.

One vital dimension of this upheaval centered on the question of gendered and sexual norms. Looking back at the end of the decade in 1938, in a New Year’s edition of *These Days* (Ngày Nay), Phan Khoi published a revealing article entitled: “The History of Short Hair: Annam since 1906.”<sup>66</sup> As someone who was born in the prior century but lived to witness the current one, Khoi offered rare insights into the transformation of Viet Nam as a modern French colony. Prior to 1906, according to Khoi, Vietnamese men allowed their hair to grow long—just

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<sup>61</sup> “Asia allows us to examine types of homosexuality other than the mutual androphilia (adult-adult usually reciprocal relations between theoretically equal-status partners who both identify with the same gender) which dominates European and American discussions...” (ix). Wayne R. Dynes and Stephen Donaldson, eds., *Asian Homosexuality*, vol. III, 13 vols. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992).

<sup>62</sup> Pheng Cheah, “Grounds of Comparison,” *Diacritics* 29.4 (1999).

<sup>63</sup> Neil Jamieson, “Some Things Poetry Can Tell Us About the Process of Social Change in Vietnam,” *Southeast Asian Studies* 39.3 (2001).

<sup>64</sup> Henchy, “Performing Modernity in the Writings of Nguyễn an Ninh and Phan Văn Hùm.”

<sup>65</sup> McHale, “Printing and Power: Vietnamese Debates over Women’s Place in Society, 1918-1934.”

<sup>66</sup> Phan Khoi, “Lịch Sử Tóc Ngắn: Annam Kể Từ 1906” (the History of Short Hair: Annam since 1906) “*Ngày Nay* (*These Days*) 149.Tet Edition (1938).

like the “women of today.” So powerful was this new cultural norm, according to the author, that boys now try to keep their hair short indefinitely. But this was not always so. Khoi cites the 1908 court case in the central imperial region against a group of entrepreneurs. Unemployed but resourceful these individuals were the proto-barbers of today. After they began cutting men’s hair, however, the imperial Court charged them with violating the public decency law (“*luật bất ung vi trọng*”) and imprisoned them for 18 months. According to Khoi, the French colonials called this case the “*révolte de cheveux tondus*” (29). Khoi’s article helps dramatize both the changing character of gender identity and its eventual crystallization. Although scholars have already documented some of these changes,<sup>67</sup> the current literature unduly presumes a stable gender referent within a heterosexual matrix according to which sex, gender, practice and desire are uniformly aligned.<sup>68</sup> What has been less examined—and what I hope to underscore—is the perception of sexual uncertainty in this decade.

Current historical reconstructions do not emphasize enough the extent of this uncertainty. Consider, for example, the following passage describing the “New Women.” In her reconstruction of the debates over this figure, Hue-Tam Ho-Tai sketches a portrait from the perspective of Pham Quynh, a well-known northern literati of this period. She writes:

He had met the ‘New Women’ and did not like her. In a talk given in May 1924, he offered a savage portrayal of this dreaded breed in his account of two young women traveling on a train. They were coiffed in the latest style, rouged and lipsticked, and wore objectionable clothes. One had propped her feet on the seat across from her and was languidly smoking a cigarette. The other affected a pair of sunglasses even though the train compartment was darkened. Supremely oblivious to the silent disapproval of their fellow passengers, they talked in carrying, self-assured voices about card parties, French food, and other frivolous pleasure in which they had recently indulged (97).<sup>69</sup>

For the older generation, according to Ho-Tai, the “New Women” were “brazen hussies: idle, self-centered, and pleasure-seeking, loud and free in their manners to a point bordering on immorality” (97).<sup>70</sup> The reconstruction here shows historical change from tradition to modernity and captures the salient features of the “New Women.” This is a valid interpretation of the archive, one that Judith Henchy also confirms. She writes:

This new media woman is likely to have cut her hair short, have worn shorts for tennis and cycling, and to have swum shamelessly in the scanty costume in the seas off the fashionable Do Son beach. She would have flaunted a daring outfit from the fashion house of Nguyen Cat Tuong, the designer of the Vietnamese *áo dai* who was popularly known by the literal French translation of his name, Lemur. Interestingly, just as the fateful *Tale of Kieu* was adopted as a national narrative, so the first atavistic claim to a national aesthetic, in the form of a national costume, was one to be displayed by women (p.239).<sup>71</sup>

Henchy makes an astute observation about the complex process by which the modern woman becomes, ironically, the icon of “tradition” for the nationalist project. I say “becomes” because this process is obviously historical. Yet, in my view, these accounts are still incomplete because

<sup>67</sup> See Ký, *La Société Vietnamienne Face À La Modernité*, Elliott, *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family*, Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1925-1945*, Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*.

<sup>68</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*: p.30.

<sup>69</sup> Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Henchy, "Performing Modernity in the Writings of Nguyễn an Ninh and Phan Văn Hùm."

they miss moments of sexual uncertainty or crisis. In short, there is a third point in and through which these narratives ought to be re-routed.

Studies of the New Women in Europe, a figure from which the Vietnamese presumably received their inspiration, highlight a milieu of sexual ambivalence. In “Discourses of Sexuality and Subjectivity: the New Woman, 1870-1936,” Carroll Smith-Rosenberg reconstructs and divides this cultural movement into two distinct generations.<sup>72</sup> Whereas the first was notable for their novel and threatening independence, described as “inverts” who aped masculine ways, the second generation was embodied in “androgynous heroines,” such as Virginia Woolf, Radclyffe Hall and other lesbians (264).<sup>73</sup> Esther Newton has written that the second generation, “wanted not simply male professions but access to the broader world of male opportunity.” Newton continues, “They drank, they smoked, they **rejected traditional feminine clothing**, lived as expatriates...” (p285, my emphasis).<sup>74</sup> There are both similarities and differences in the description of the Vietnamese New Women compared with those of their European counterparts. What kinds of “objectionable” clothing, we might ask, did the Vietnamese New Women wear? How might this issue, in turn, be related to the broader theoretical problem of sexed and gender identity? European lesbian discourse influenced the Vietnamese, even though current reconstructions seem to have glossed over this other cultural history, preserving instead a master narrative that unjustifiably presumes a heterosexual matrix for the understanding of sexuality and gender.

Consider scholar David Marr’s attitude when he stumbled on a source about “women with beards.” In his analysis of the *New Women’s News* (Phu Nu Tan Van), Marr writes that in its early years the journal printed stories that “ranged from the very immediate and serious (for example, protecting the foetus or treating infant diseases) to the distant and arcane (for example, **circus women with beards**, or royal perversions toward women throughout history).” (225, my emphasis).<sup>75</sup> Why does the discourse of reproduction and the fetus serve as an example of the “immediate and serious” while the problem of gender recognition is perceived as “distant and arcane”? Is this Marr’s normative prescription or those of the primary documents? What kinds of subjects in the early 1930s could affirm the importance of reproduction and take for granted the question of gender recognition? My point is that, whether unconscious or not, certain sexual subjectivities are left out of the picture, ones that are rendered unworthy of serious examination, but which I find nonetheless populating the archive. I wish to highlight this vital gap in the present literature, offering a slightly different picture in illuminating moments of gendered and sexual uncertainty and, in so doing, de-centering the prevailing narrative.

*The Blurring of Genders: Short Hair, Painted Nails and Lipstick*

In the early 1930s, the practice of trimming one’s hair was fashionable for both men and women. Though hardly a surprise for us today, the Vietnamese back then received this new trend with mixed testimony. Everywhere around them they saw the growth of new genders and bodies, and this unisex hairstyle was but one fad among others that flourished, no doubt, due to the mass of students who returned from their studies in Europe. Hence, Phan Van Hum observed

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<sup>72</sup> Carrol Smith-Rosenberg, “Discourses of Sexuality and Subjectivity: The New Woman, 1870-1936,” *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, eds. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus and Jr. George Chauncey (New York: New American Library, 1989).

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Esther Newton, “The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman,” *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, eds. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus and Jr. George Chauncey (New York: New American Library, 1989).

<sup>75</sup> Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1925-1945*.

in 1934 of dramatic changes in men and women's comportment only within the past five or six years.<sup>76</sup> Observing the dizzying transformation she saw around her, one female writer opposed the new hairstyle because it would make Vietnamese women look too "Western."<sup>77</sup> Another asked about the historical origins of this bizarre fad.<sup>78</sup> Yet another remarked that, despite how strange women now looked, people would eventually get accustomed to the new trend.<sup>79</sup> Still, another editorial came from a male writer who praised the idea. He reasoned that despite the androgynous effect—women looking "just like men"—it was probably a good thing: since the majority of the population is poor, trimming one's hair is both economical and practical in safeguarding against disease.<sup>80</sup> Still, another writer predicted that, "Women's hair will in the end look like men's, but we have not yet reached that point because some men today still prefer keeping their hair long."<sup>81</sup> But the question of hairstyle represented only one type of bodily practice in the midst of cultural upheaval.

Applying cosmetics was another new bodily practice. Painting one's nails, applying lipstick and other kinds of facial cosmetics were hotly debated because they, like the practice of hair trimming, contributed to the blurring of the genders. In addition to its potential for the extraction of cheap labor and raw resources, Indochina also provided opportunities for France to expand new markets, e.g. the cosmetic industry. Commenting on the effect of this industry, one writer observed, "[A]s for male youths of this country: they brush their lips, apply lipstick and cosmetic powder **like girls**, wear the 'Charleston' pants, fashionable Paris shirts, sporting swanky clothes..." (p.11).<sup>82</sup> This blurring of the genders, which seemed to have anticipated the contemporary category of the "metro-sexual," would become the butt of a joke in a scene in Vu Trong Phung's novel *Dumb Luck* (1936). After waking up one morning, Mr. Civilization is seen combing his hair and making his face. The narrator states, "He painted his fingernails with bright-red nail polish. Then he applied pancake to his cheeks and covered them with a layer of powder. With his black hair curling down the nape of his long neck, his bulging eyes and Adam's apple, and his milky white face, he looked like a **feminine man** of lipstick and powder..." (119, my emphasis).<sup>83</sup> Although this scene is probably a satirical attack on what "civilization" has become and reflects Vu Trong Phung's cynical disapproval of what he saw all around him,<sup>84</sup> this episode nevertheless captures a sense of the dramatic changes in gender norms, to which the prior editorials clearly testify.

<sup>76</sup> Phan Văn Hùm, "Dư Luận Và Thời Thượng [Public Opinion and the Vogue]," *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 246 (1934).

<sup>77</sup> Phan Kim Phụng, "Vấn Đề Hớt Tóc Của Phụ Nữ Việt Nam Ta (the Question of Cutting Our Vietnamese Women's Hair)," *Tiếng Dân (The People's Voice)* 168 (1929).

<sup>78</sup> [NoAuthor], "Tại Sao Đàn Bà Hớt Tóc [Why Women Had to Cut Their Hair]," *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 26 (1929).

<sup>79</sup> Kỳ Khôi, "Đàn Bà Hớt Tóc [Women Trimming Their Hair]," *Tiếng Dân (The People's Voice)* 147 (1929).

<sup>80</sup> [NoAuthor], "Độc Giả Luận Đàn: Đàn Bà Việt Nam Có Nên Cúp Tóc Không (Reader's Discussion: Should Vietnamese Women Clip Their Hair?)," *Tiếng Dân (The People's Voice)* 158 (1929).

<sup>81</sup> Tam Hữu, "Mái Tóc Của Phụ Nữ Tương Lai [Women's Future Hair Style]," *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 248 (1934).

<sup>82</sup> "...Còn thanh niên nước ta thì: dôi mài cạo gọt môi mép, cũng **thoa son đánh phấn như gái**, quần 'charleston,' áo 'Paris mode' chung diện loạt loạt, rồi thì đoàn năm lù bảy rú nhau đi 'thường nguyệt ngắm trăng.'" Thanh Ngôn, "Ý Kiến Bạn Thanh Niên: Vấn Đề Đi Điểm Ở Xã Hội Ta (Ideas from a Young Man: The Issue of Prostitution in Our Society)," *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 115 (1932).

<sup>83</sup> Zinoman, ed., *Dumb Luck*

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

For some critics, the idea of women's emancipation was scandalous enough, promoted by a narrow cohort of women who were pushing the envelope too far. Vietnamese society, they reasoned, was simply not prepared for such wide-reaching changes. Some male readers like the literati Nguyen Ba Hoc warned that, if women were to assume male activities, they would lose their sense of "traditional" propriety.<sup>85</sup> Another writer conceded that although women should probably shed their "shy and diffident" demeanor, they avoid "losing their woman tendencies that would otherwise make them appear like men."<sup>86</sup> Thach Lan displays a similar anxiety in his article entitled "European Women," part of a collection of missives he sent home recounting his adventures in Paris. Besides noting the sexual liberation that characterized European women, for which the Vietnamese counterparts were supposedly ill-prepared, Thach Lan also cited the following dangers:

I believe that although they [European women] have more freedom than their Annamite counterparts, what will be the consequences of such freedom? Yes, in a few years, in ten or one hundred more years, women here in terms of their liberty will be on par with men, that is, women will be able to play and work like their male counterparts, just like men, except with one difference: they will still have menstruation, still give birth, and will still be weaker! Those aspects will never change!...[some censored lines]... **Women who turn into men**...[some censored lines]...like so—because it is impossible to alter one's body entirely, one's biology—otherwise, the family will be exterminated, and society will face an enormous crisis...<sup>87</sup>

Thach Lan's letter suggests that unusual changes in sexual norms are taking place in Europe, changes in which women can now turn into men. These changes, Thach Lan warns, could lead to the end of the bourgeois nuclear family. His disbelief in the extent of the human body's plasticity forces him to resort to biological determinism, no matter how tenuous biology may be as a foundation on which to ground gender.<sup>88</sup> Thach Lan's apprehensions provide some measure of the extent of the new bodies and genders that exploded in the public discourse.

In the early 1930s, Vietnamese readers received spectacular news from Europe, the United States and elsewhere about diverse forms of sexuality and gender: women who vaguely looked like men; women who became men; half-men, half-women; men and women who underwent sex-change; and finally, men and women who desired only those of their own sex. Despite the outcry by some male writers, they could not stop the influx in the colony of these spectacular stories.

#### *Army Women Disguised as Men*

One set of stories from abroad included reports of women who disguised themselves as army men. In a three-part series, the *New Women's News* (Phu Nu Tan Van) published the case

<sup>85</sup> Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1925-1945*: p.203. Marr's source is *Nam Phong* (Southern Wind).

<sup>86</sup> The original quotation: "Tôi nói đây chẳng phải bảo chị em bỏ hết cái tánh chất đàn bà, mà làm như đàn ông..." Lan Anh, "Tánh E Thẹn Của Phụ Nữ [the Shy Character of Women]," *Phu Nữ Tân Văn* (*New Women's News*) 58 (1930).

<sup>87</sup> Thach Lan, "Thơ Ở Paris Gởi Về: Nhà Thố Ở Âu-Châu [Letters from Paris: Brothels in Europe]," *Phu Nữ Tân Văn* (*New Women's News*) 57 (1930). The original quotation: "Tôi nghĩ rằng bọn này tự do hơn đàn bà Annam mà rồi không biết cái kết quả sẽ ra thế nào? Ừ, vài mươi năm, một trăm năm nữa, đàn bà ở đây về mặt tự do, sẽ giống như đàn ông cả, nghĩa là họ sẽ chơi và làm việc làm của nam-tử, giống hệt nam-tử, mà chỉ còn khác một điều: là họ còn kinh-nguyệt, họ phải đẻ và họ yếu đuối hơn! Sự đó không sửa được!... [some censored lines]... **Đàn bà mà đã biến ra đàn ông**...[censored line]...như thế --vì không làm sao mà đổi cả cái thân thể, cái sánh-lý của họ được --thì gia-đình sẽ tiêu, và xã hội cũng sẽ có một cuộc khủng hoảng lớn."

<sup>88</sup> Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*.

of a boisterous British colonel by the name of “Barker” who was legally married to a “Mrs. Elfreda Haward.” Due to her uncommonly large body size and masculine behavior, none of the soldiers under Barker’s command realized, except for the wife, that he was actually a woman named Valerie Smith. “He” was discovered to be a “she” only when s/he was arrested upon failing to appear before a court summons. Although it was reported that a large audience attended the court hearing, the Vietnamese press neither acknowledged nor displayed feelings of shock or horror over the lesbian overtones of the women’s relationship. This attitude is consistent with the English print media of the time which, according to Laura Doan, “overlooked the link between (masculine) dress and (homo)sexuality.”<sup>89</sup>

Despite its potential reception as a far-fetched European scandal, the anonymous writer of this news story displays her artful skill in linking it to a prior tradition. The writer begins by praising the Chinese legend of Zai Sheng Yuan (or Manh Le Quan in Vietnamese), the heroine of a seventeenth century Qing Dynasty tale who disguised herself as a man to sit through and pass the imperial exams. That the title of the article is “The Rebirth of Manh Le Quan” implies that “Barker” is the reincarnation of this classical heroine.<sup>90</sup> In the third article of the series, the author writes, “This story is exactly the same as that of Manh Le Quan long ago who disguised herself as a man to be the king’s prime minister and who married Luu Yen Ngoc as her wife.” (“Chuyện này có một chỗ lạ, y như chuyện Mạnh-Lê-quân thuở xưa giả trai làm tể tướng, lấy Luu Yến Ngọc làm vợ”).<sup>91</sup> By effectively substituting one character for another, the article produces the effect of suturing if not collapsing the temporal and cultural distance that spans the two women’s worlds. This rhetorical effect is made clear by the author’s use of “our sisters:” “If only women were allowed equality of education and social standing as men are, then just as **our sisters** in times past were able to reach the First-rank doctorate in the feudal Court exams, so **our sisters** today can also become court barristers” (“Nếu cứ để cho bạn phụ nữ được bình đẳng với đờn ông trong sự học hành và trong giai cấp xã hội, thì ngày xưa chị em mình cũng làm được Trạng nguyên Tể tướng ngày nay cũng làm được Trạng-sư quan toà, chớ có lạ gì”).<sup>92</sup> The psychic identification with characters of the past, sometimes enacted by scholars and social movements, produces a shared sense of historical burden and continuity, even as the identification elides manifold layers of difference, a strategy that the gender historian Joan W. Scott has coined “fantasy echo.”<sup>93</sup> As a result, a European story of female gender-crossing is rendered not only less distant and foreign but also a historical *repetition* of a classical tale, the presumptively shared canon of knowledge by male literati opposed to gender emancipation.

The topos of female gender-crossing recurs in another piece in the same year and deploying a like rhetorical strategy. This time the event took place in neighboring China where a young woman named Vuong Khue, disguised as a man, rose to the high rank of deputy army commander.<sup>94</sup> She joined the army after both her parents had died, and she had no living relatives. This article, like the previous one, begins by appealing to another pre-modern legend: the Chinese heroine “Moc Lan” who, for twelve years, disguised herself as a man, undetected, to

<sup>89</sup> Laura Doan, "Reading Female Masculinities in the 1920s," *Feminist Studies* 24.3 (1998).

<sup>90</sup> [NoAuthor], "Đàn Bà Đời Nay: Mạnh Lê Quân Tái Thê (Women Today: The Rebirth of Manh Le Quan) " *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 1 (1929).

<sup>91</sup> [NoAuthor], "Nói Thêm Về Chuyện Người Đàn Bà Giả Trai [More on the Story About the Woman Who Disguised Herself as a Man]," *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 6 (1929).

<sup>92</sup> [NoAuthor], "Đàn Bà Đời Nay: Mạnh Lê Quân Tái Thê (Women Today: The Rebirth of Manh Le Quan) ".

<sup>93</sup> Joan W. Scott, "Fantasy Echo: History and the Construction of Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 27.2 (2001).

<sup>94</sup> [NoAuthor], "Một Người Con Gái Tàu Giả Trai Đi Lĩnh, Làm Tới Quan to [a Chinese Woman Disguises as a Man, Becomes a High-Rank Official]," *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 11 (1929).

replace her dead father in the army. Likewise, Vương Khue also rose through the army ranks because of her talent. When her cover was broken, according to the article, the General in charge was in no way upset or angry, but rather impressed by the young woman's brilliance. Treating her with "respect and dignity," he decided to keep her in the army along with her rank.

In both stories, a brief allusion to a "medicine man" ("thầy thuốc") is invoked to help verify the woman's gender. In the "Barker" story, the article states that, "only after the court had a **medicine man** (thầy thuốc) make an examination was it known that colonel Barker was a woman whose real name is Valerie Smith and whose Australian husband had previously died."<sup>95</sup> In the Vương Khue story, the writer comments, "According to the **medicine man** (thầy thuốc), she is still virgin and very healthy due to her vigorous regimen in the army." In the contemporary vernacular, the term "medicine man" (thầy thuốc) has a quaint connotation referring to herbal specialists or those trained in Sino-Vietnamese medicine; by contrast, the term "medical doctor" ("bác sỹ") refers to what we generally mean by a Western-trained physician. This biased connotation may be a vestige of the colonial period when by 1936 modern French medicine gradually penetrated and pervaded many aspects of Vietnamese life. The two stories above were published seven years earlier when less than a handful of Vietnamese doctors had graduated from the Hanoi Medical School, the hub for training in modern Western medicine for all of Indochina.<sup>96</sup> It is no coincidence that although the term "medicine men" describes specialists in charge of verifying the women's gender, both articles display a relative absence of a discourse of medical pathology.<sup>97</sup> This interpretative point is significant insofar as it reveals the general historical milieu to which these stories belong. Far from rendering these women foreign or deviant, both cases demonstrate rhetorical strategies that domesticate the figure of the gender-crosser, invoking them as exemplary models for the Vietnamese women's emancipation movement.

One last example can be found in another article published a year later that deploys the same strategy. The bulk of the article recounts three historical cases of French army women who passed as men.<sup>98</sup> Like the prior ones, this piece begins by appealing to cultural narratives closer to home. Although Vietnamese scholars, unlike those of other nations, according to this article, have failed to account for these kinds of "women" and their heroic accomplishments in history, surely there must have been cases in Vietnam as well. Presenting a classical proverb as circumstantial evidence, the writer explains, "As we can see, women can also display their courage: if the king had allowed female soldiers, women would have willingly gone to battle; it would be no surprise, then, if in times past there were [Vietnamese] women who disguised themselves as male soldiers for their dead husbands" ("Xem đó thì biết đàn bà cũng bày tỏ can-tràng của mình ra: nếu vua bắt lính đàn bà, thì mình sẽ đi, để thay cho chồng; như vậy, biết đâu lại không có người đã giã trai mà đi lính thay cho chồng thiệt" [nonstandard spelling in

<sup>95</sup> [NoAuthor], "Đàn Bà Đòi Nay: Mạnh Lệ Quân Tái Thê (Women Today: The Rebirth of Manh Le Quan) ".

<sup>96</sup> Nguyễn Ngọc Lanh, ed., 100 Năm Đại Học Y Hà Nội: Năm Tháng Và Sự Kiện (100 Years of the Hanoi Medical School: Years and Events) (Hanoi: Trường Đại Học Y Hà Nội (The Hanoi Medical School), 2002).

<sup>97</sup> In pre-modern Chinese accounts of sexuality, the highly touted "yin and yang" model does not necessarily refer to a fundamental heterosexuality; on the contrary, the model bolstered the cultural belief in human androgyny. See Charlotte Furth, "Androgynous Males and Deficient Females: Biology and Gender Boundaries in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century China," The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader, eds. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>98</sup> Vân Anh, "Nhi-Nữ Anh Hùng: Chuyện Ba Người Đàn Bà Giã Trai Đi Lính [Women Heroes: The Case of Three Women Who Disguised Themselves as Men to Enter the Military]," Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News) 49 (1930).

original]). By the logic of the argument, the three cases of French army women who disguised as men ought to be no major source of shock: if Vietnamese women can pass, so too can the French. Furthermore, and more importantly, none of the female cross-dressers in the article is explicitly tied to a fixed homosexual identity. This detail is consistent with the analogy that opens the featured article: the Vietnamese woman who would disguise herself as a man in battle does so on behalf of her dead *husband*. Of course, her married status may not, in practice, exclude the possibility of her homosexual proclivities, but the point is that these women are untethered to any fixed identity that would foreclose their erotic object choices.

In each of these documents, therefore, the figure of the female gender-crosser in no way represents a form of “dynamics of displacement” or corporeal deviancy. Quite the opposite: they are embodied aspirations of a heroic ideal—consistent with scholarly studies on Qing-era texts that exhibit the gender-crossing phenomenon in question.<sup>99</sup> Just as there were some Vietnamese who objected to the emergence of the new bodies and genders they saw all around them, so there were others who defended these changes by invoking historical Chinese cases. In fact, Laura Doan notes that the period after World War I in Europe was marked by “unprecedented confusion over gender and sexual identity” (665). Studying the “Barker” controversy in English print media, Doan writes that although the scandal took place only three months after the banning of Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*, a novelistic defense of lesbianism, the Barker controversy failed to register any “stable spectatorial effect” (664). If we were to identify a link between female masculinity and homosexual identity, according to Doan, we ought to do so with caution because in England in the 1920s, “fashion-conscious women of all sexual persuasions were obliged to ‘cross-dress’ by donning boyish or mannish attire and by cutting their hair short” (667).<sup>100</sup> Of course, some lesbians during the time could and did exploit the fluid crossings of categories in order to live and thrive: the growth of gender ambiguity could have led to a complex production of diverse and acceptable kinds of desires, including but not limited to homoerotic ones. But if Laura Doan is right, the necessary link between a fixed gender and (homo)sexual identity in this historical juncture is, at most, tenuous.

#### *The Bearded Women Phenomenon*

Another core group of documents were preoccupied with what I am calling the “bearded women” phenomenon. Presenting a picture of a woman, usually European, who had grown a beard, the article would then attempt to explain away the phenomenon or ponder the unknown horizons of the human species. This image, however, may strike some Vietnamese readers today as abject, an unpleasant icon, discordant with the bourgeois idea of the “New Women,” imagined as modern, beautiful, smooth, fashion-conscious—the embodiment of Vietnam as a civilized nation in the world stage.<sup>101</sup> Yet, if much of the inspiration for the “New Women” came from Europe, it seems that this other less respectable history has been conveniently occluded. Consider, for example, a passage from the following article:

When I was in Paris, I witnessed firsthand many women with long black beards. If they hadn’t worn women’s clothing, I would have thought they were men. I took this as a

<sup>99</sup> See Roland Altenburger, “Is It Clothes That Make the Man? Cross-Dressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 64.2 (2005), Wai Yee Lee, “Heroic Transformations: Women and National Trauma in Early Qing Literature” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 59.2 (1999).

<sup>100</sup> Doan, “Reading Female Masculinities in the 1920s.”

<sup>101</sup> On the regulation of women’s image in contemporary Vietnam, see Lisa Drummond, “The Modern “Vietnamese Woman”: Socialization and Women’s Magazines,” *Gender Practices in Contemporary Vietnam*, eds. Lisa Drummond and Helle Rydstrom (Denmark: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) Press and Singapore University Press, 2004).

strange phenomenon and upon my return I consulted some medicine men [thầy thuốc] but some said this or that and others were ambiguous; still others simply admitted to not knowing why (p.23, my translation).<sup>102</sup>

As the title of this article suggests--“A Question of Science”-- the tone is less characterized by abject disgust or moral condemnation than by measured curiosity. The rest of the article elaborates on the author’s research efforts to resolve this puzzling phenomenon. Drawing on another Chinese article addressing the same quandary, the author concludes with his perceived scientific explanation. He states,

So it is that a man’s mustache like women’s menstruation each follows the law of nature according to which excess blood is secreted. According to this theory, if women had poor blood, ceased menstruation below, that is, the blood were to flow upward, the result is that women will grow beards. **There is nothing unusual about the phenomenon** (p.23, my emphasis).<sup>103</sup>

This fearless and cerebral exercise of explaining away the “bearded women” phenomenon resonates with a milieu in which superstition and myth were gradually banished by the light of reason and the disenchantment of science.<sup>104</sup> But science and its purported claims towards detached objectivity fail to capture the actual processes of judgment.<sup>105</sup> Scholars have pointed out, for instance, that far from operating through cool rationality, scientific activity is often haunted and beset by the very problems it wishes to banish: the unbound imagination, subjective figural language and passionate curiosity.<sup>106</sup> Hence, it would be a mistake to expel those impulses often attributed to the arts and letters from science.<sup>107</sup> It is no wonder, then, that some of these impulses are also found in the bevy of other “bearded women” articles featured in *The Science Journal*. Curious about the origins of this unusual figure, one article traced it throughout European cultural history, beginning with the Greeks and Romans, followed by the Germans, and then onwards to the reign of Charles II who favored three male soldiers, one of whom was a woman dressed as a man; and finally, the story of Holland’s Queen Marguerite who grew a beard to display her “royalty.”<sup>108</sup> Another article casually featured the story of a “beard contest” in France where women were reportedly also contestants.<sup>109</sup> Still, another marveled at the strangeness of this world where some men exhibited large breasts and women, beards.<sup>110</sup> Yet another showed a picture of “her” in its front-page edition.<sup>111</sup>

<sup>102</sup> VA, "Một Vấn Đề Khoa Học: Tại Sao Lại Có Đàn Bà Mọc Râu? [a Question of Science: Why Are There Women Who Grow Beards?]," *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 84 (1931).

<sup>103</sup> The original quotation: “Thế là râu của đàn ông, cũng như kinh của đàn bà, đều thuận theo lý tự nhiên, mà tiết cái huyết dư đi vậy. Theo nghĩa như thế, thì nếu đàn bà huyết hư, mà dứt kinh ở dưới, tức là huyết chạy lên, thành ra mọc râu ở trên, chớ không có gì lạ” (p.23). See VA, "Một Vấn Đề Khoa Học: Tại Sao Lại Có Đàn Bà Mọc Râu? [a Question of Science: Why Are There Women Who Grow Beards?]."

<sup>104</sup> See the section on “Science and Objectivity” in Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1925-1945*.

<sup>105</sup> See Anthony J. Cascardi, "The Consequences of Enlightenment," *Consequences of Enlightenment*, vol. 30, Literature, Culture, Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>106</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989).

<sup>107</sup> Emily Martin, "The Egg and Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles," *Feminist Theory and the Body*, eds. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>108</sup> HGT, "Đã to Vú Lại Rậm Râu (They Have Big Breasts and a Beard!)" *Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal]* 25 (1932).

<sup>109</sup> [NoAuthor], "Đàn Bà Có Râu (Bearded Women)," *Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal]* 64 (1934).

<sup>110</sup> Tân Kỹ, "Mấy Cái Lạ Trên Thế Giới (Strange and Unusual Phenomena in the World)," *Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal]* 87 (1935).

<sup>111</sup> [NoAuthor], "Đàn Bà Có Dâu (a Bearded Woman)," *Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal]* 215 (1939).

Of course, traces of aversion did strike some 1930s readers upon apprehending this spectacle. Consider the opening paragraph in the *New Women's News*' three-part series entitled, "Strange Women in the World":<sup>112</sup>

In this life, among our sisters, there are those naturally born with the most strangest of organic forms that nobody can possibly imagine. Whether they are Siamese twins, those born without arms, legs, or those denuded with only a bodily trunk, yet are able to still survive; whether they are overly fat and four times the standard size of a person; or whether they grow beards etc. strange, strange, odd, odd... it seems impossible to list them all (p.11, my translation).<sup>113</sup>

We could argue that a certain kind of "queerness" is being produced in this passage. Certain subjects are not only rendered not only non-normative, but they challenge the limits of what is considered culturally possible. Like other "crippled" women,<sup>114</sup> the "bearded" ones belong to those rare and deformed creatures that baffle the mind.<sup>115</sup> In another article published two years later, a writer speculated that this ubiquitous figure in France is probably afflicted with "diabetes," hence diminishing her "natural" beauty.<sup>116</sup> Yet, despite these "queer"-producing effects, these articles are tempered by a countervailing discourse. The passage above, for instance, begins by invoking these "queer crips"—as they would be called today—as members of a larger community: "In this life, *among our sisters...*" (my emphasis). In the next paragraph of the same article, the reporter notes that these strange women are considered by some as another species of humanity: "There is a Western writer who has circled the globe documenting all sorts of strange bodily forms and has categorized them as the 'fifth race' ('*cinquième race*') (French in original; my translation). Although it is unclear who exactly this Western writer is—no name is provided—this taxonomic practice is part and parcel of the Enlightenment project to organize and master the natural world, and by so doing, produce in effect all kinds of hierarchies. In this article, however, those subjects who are ostensibly queered are simultaneously marveled at as the

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<sup>112</sup> V.A., "Đàn Bà Quái Lạ Trên Đời: Hai Cô Dính Mình Với Nhau Ma Một Cô Muốn Lấy Chồng, Một Cô Không Muốn; Người Đàn Bà Thêu Bằng Cẳng, Phần 1 (Strange Women in the World: A Siamese Twin One of Whom Wishes to Get Married While the Other Does Not; One Who Embroiders Using Her Legs, Part 1)," *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 94 (1931), VA, "Đàn Bà Quái Lạ Trên Đời: Cô Violetta Không Tay Không Chân, Mụ Adrienne Mọc Râu Ghê Gớm, Phần II (Strange Women in the World: Ms. Violetta Has No Arms or Legs, Ms. Adrienne Grows a Frightful Beard, Part 2)," *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 86 (1931), VA, "Đàn Bà Quái Lạ: Trên Đời: Người Bán Nam, Bán Nữ; Cô Ngó Hình Như Con Beo, Người Ta Gọi Là 'Femme Panthère; Một Cô Gây Đờn Bằng Cẳng, Phần 3 (Strange Women in the World: A Half Man, Half Woman; a Woman Who Looks Like a Panther, People Call Her 'Femme Panthère; Another Woman Who Plucks the Guitar Using Her Feet, Part 3)," *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 99 (1931).

<sup>113</sup> See V.A., "Đàn Bà Quái Lạ Trên Đời: Hai Cô Dính Mình Với Nhau Ma Một Cô Muốn Lấy Chồng, Một Cô Không Muốn; Người Đàn Bà Thêu Bằng Cẳng, Phần 1 (Strange Women in the World: A Siamese Twin One of Whom Wishes to Get Married While the Other Does Not; One Who Embroiders Using Her Legs, Part 1)." The original quotation: "Trên đời này, trong chị em ta, có nhiều người sanh ra tự nhiên là những cái quái-tượng kỳ hình, không á có thể tưởng-tượng được. Nào là hai người sinh ra dính lưng với nhau,; nào là người không tay, không chân [spelling in original], chỉ tro trợ có cái mình, thể mà vẫn sống; nào là người mập lớn và cân nặng bằng bốn người thường; nào là người mọc râu...v.v...quái quái kỳ kỳ, chẳng biết sao mà nói cho hết" (p.11).

<sup>114</sup> Some of these documents can be interpreted through a "queer disabilities" lens. See Bob Guter and John R. Killacky, eds., *Queer Crips: Disabled Gay Men and Their Stories* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2004), Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

<sup>115</sup> For a cultural study of the "freak show," see Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed., *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University, 1996).

<sup>116</sup> DB, "Đàn Bà Có Râu (Women with Beards)," *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 185 (1933).

unknown horizons of humanity: “strange, strange, odd, odd...it seems impossible to list them all.” These figures, in other words, signify not so much the limits of the possible as the limits of the *knowable*. In the diabetes article, the writer concludes, “Doctors [bác-sĩ] have tried to find the cause for why women grow beards, but since time immemorial they have left behind a big question mark” (p.29).<sup>117</sup> In describing the historical milieu of this period, Marr comments, “Whatever their political persuasion, Vietnamese intellectuals of the 1920s and 1930s were fascinated with news from overseas. Stories ranged from the bizarre (the existence of bearded women in Europe), to the gravest problems of war and peace” (p.340).<sup>118</sup> Hence, far from being a straightforward process of queer marginalization, these early 1930s “bearded women” articles also display a general attitude of wonder and curiosity—an attitude that beholds and questions the Other-- even when “it” may, at first, baffle or defy comprehension.

*L'Écriture Féminine?: Writing Female Masculinity*

In 1932, the female writer Nguyen Thi Kiem proposed a strategy for women to lay claim to a literary world traditionally dominated by men. Kiem pointed to the long history of “womanization” [nu hoa] by male authors. She cites the case of Dong Ho—whose best works depicts a wife sobbing and lamenting—and Tan Da—whose poetry assumes the voice of a female lover (32).<sup>119</sup> The author concludes that these gender-crossing practices are “good” for literary culture insofar as they enrich the multiple perspectives available. By the same token, if they were to aspire to write like men, women would have to “masculinize” themselves. In her proposal, Ms. Kiem explains, “[O]ne recent revolution worth paying attention to within literary feminine circles is female masculinization (*la masculinisation*), that is, the phenomenon whereby women transform themselves into a man” (p.32, French in original). But what might such a transformation entail? How would one go about doing so? Would it also take the form of cross-gender identification? The tone of the article is serious not ironic. During this period, the literate readership would have been aware of European female authors who wrote under masculine pen names, including George Sand or George Elliot.<sup>120</sup> For Ms. Kiem, the practice of “female masculinization” would require that women “sacrifice” (“*hy sanh*”), indeed abandon, their specific “Self” (“*bon nga*”) if they wanted to replace it with one that was characterized by “scientificity, philosophical tendency, objectivity.” The author’s proposal, then, reversed the cultural logic. By appropriating precisely men’s rhetorical strategy, this female writer asserted that women, too, could be a man’s equal. Implicit in such a conception is an affirmation of the so-called masculine intellect as opposed to the feminine body. Such an aspiration, though, reaches its limit: “However much they wish to masculinize themselves,” Kiem concludes, “women cannot do so completely due to their character [*cai ban sac*].” The term *ban sac*, literally translated as “character,” also implies something immanent or fundamental to one’s identity. As a result, these “characters,” Kiem suggests, pose an obstacle to this gender-crossing practice insofar as they represent insuperable dimensions of female identity.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> In *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, on page 340, Footnote 51, David Marr cites that the date of his source is May 28, 1930 (Phu Nu Tan Van [New Women’s News]: 84), but this must be a typographical error. The May 28, 1930 issue presents no bearded woman article whatsoever. Yet, issue number 84 of *The New Women’s News* does. The latter issue was published in 1931. Hence, the article Marr most likely referred to is the following: VA, “Một Vấn Đề Khoa Học: Tại Sao Lại Có Đàn Bà Mọc Râu? [a Question of Science: Why Are There Women Who Grow Beards?].”

<sup>119</sup> Kiem, “Cô Nguyễn Thị Kiêm Nói Về Vấn Đề Nữ Lưu Và Văn Học [Ms. Nguyen Thi Kiem Speaks About the Question of Women and Literature].”

<sup>120</sup> Thiều Sơn, “Nữ Sĩ Pháp [French Women Writers],” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 225 (1933).

Ms. Kiem's proposition, however, was challenged by Phan Van Hum, a Trotskyite philosopher who had been educated in France under Dr. Maurice Dide (1873-1944), a psychiatrist and head of the Toulouse hospital for the mad.<sup>121</sup> Hum was a frequent contributor to the *The New Women's News* featuring many articles introducing readers to European thinkers.<sup>122</sup> In his response entitled "The 'Masculinization' Literature," Hum attributed whatever stylistic changes or lack thereof in women's writing not to some essential identity but to women's changing position in relation to society's material and historical circumstances. After surveying a brief history of women's oppression, Hum reasons that since women can now engage more actively with men in the public sphere, women would, "conduct themselves more like men and, hence, write more like men...indeed, exactly like men" (11-12).<sup>123</sup> Hum concludes: "For this reason, women's writing that appears 'stronger' is not due to the masculinization phenomenon so much as the liberation of society." The article does not make clear exactly how gendered conduct in the public sphere might correspond to writing practice, but it is apparent that for Hum the gendered practice of writing ought to be located less in an immutable identity than in the changing historical conditions of society. If so, then the manifestation of "female masculine" writing is nothing but a reflection of one stage of society's progress towards "liberation." This claim parallels Hum's general effort to launch what Judith Henchy describes as an "offensive against linguistic mystification," the interest in opposing the claims of "mystical fads" with "materialist theories" (22-23).<sup>124</sup> Pushing Hum's reasoning further, would the moment of "liberation" imply that all of society be masculinized? Or does society reach a point where the gender distinctions be eradicated altogether? Phan Van Hum later supported abolishment of the traditional nuclear family, and so this question is not unwarranted. He reasoned that people can survive without this social unit which was a hindrance to social progress, in part, because it encouraged group self-interest. He states, "Yes, I affirm the following: society does not need the family unit, and that it is the dialectical negation to society's progress" ("Vâng, tôi quả quyết rằng: xã hội không cần có gia đình và gia đình là cái biền chúng trở ngại sự tiến bộ của xã hội") (p.7-8).<sup>125</sup> Hence, the idea of overcoming, in a Hegelian sense, the distinctions of the sexes seems to be one implication of Hum's argument.

In response, Madame Nguyen Duc Nhuan, the *New Women's News*' publisher, not only opposed the idea of female masculinization but also worried about the growing feminization of Vietnamese men.<sup>126</sup> If gendered conduct in the public sphere manifested itself in one's writing, she claimed, then, women ought to conduct themselves in more feminine ways. By the same token, male intellectuals of the country needed to appear more "masculine." She writes:

<sup>121</sup> Phan Văn Hùm, "Bạn Trai, Bạn Gái [Boyfriends, Girlfriends]," *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 257 (1934). Hum states, "I will not remind us here of the words of my former teacher Dr. Maurice Dide, the head of a psychiatric hospital for the mad in Toulouse. He said: <<Language is the expression or rather the dissimulation of thought>>". ("Tôi không nhàm nhắc lại lời nói của ông thầy cũ tôi là ông Dr. Maurice Dide, viện trưởng nhà thương điên ở Toulouse. Ông nói: <<Le langage est l'expression ou plutôt la dissimulation de la pensée>>", p.8).

<sup>122</sup> See Henchy, "Performing Modernity in the Writings of Nguyễn an Ninh and Phan Văn Hùm."

<sup>123</sup> Phan Văn Hùm, "Văn "Nam Hóa" ["Masculinization" Literature]," *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 245 (1934).

<sup>124</sup> Henchy, "Performing Modernity in the Writings of Nguyễn an Ninh and Phan Văn Hùm."

<sup>125</sup> See Phan Văn Hùm, "Xã Hội Cần Có Gia Đình Không? [Does Society Need the Family Unit?]," *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 256 (1934).

<sup>126</sup> Nguyễn Đức Nhuận, "Hiện Tượng Nam Hóa [the Phenomenon of Masculinisation]," *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 248 (1934).

Looking out at the streets, one sees **that our sisters speak and act just like men**. People believe that that is also one form that masculinization takes... In my view, quite apart from the reasons Hum has elaborated in regards to masculinization, there is also the following phenomenon. In our country, men who are intellectuals appear weak because primarily they do not exercise like **soldiers** of other countries. Moreover, they are partial to the idea of appearing classy and so do not want to get their hands into **tiresome work** and, as a result, they become thin and weak, walk and stand drooping—and so, the character of their writing would have to be feeble (emphasis mine, p.6).

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Nhìn ra đường, ta thấy chị em đi đứng nói-năng như nam-tử, người ta cho rằng đó cũng là một cái hình thức của sự ‘nam hóa’... Theo ý tôi, thì ngoài những lẽ ông Hùm đã kể về nam-hóa còn có cái hiện tượng như sau này. Xứ ta đàn ông trí thức yếu đuối là phần nhiều không tập lính như đàn ông các nước, vả lại vì thiên-kiến muốn tỏ ra mình sang không mó tay vào làm các việc nhọc-nhăn, hóa ra mình gầy vóc yếu, đi đứng xụi lơ. Tánh tình ngôn-ngữ cũng phải yểu ớt (p.6).<sup>127</sup>

In addition to corroborating the extent of the gender upheaval taking place during this time, Madame Nhuân’s comment also belongs to the motley cohort who disapproved of these changes. Madame Nhuân criticizes the effeminacy of the intellectual class and idealizes a kind of military and/or working-class masculinity, despite her bourgeois status. Her statement is also striking in revealing a nascent link between gender and nation: Vietnamese men need to “man up” precisely because they appear weak and effeminate *relative to* other modern nations in the world stage. Whatever the case, in this period, Madame Nhuân’s view along with those of Nguyen Thi Kiem and Phan Van Hum represents but one perspective in a larger cultural contestation over the social role and meaning of gender.

#### *Gender Crossings in the Literary Imagination*

Literary works published during this period also thematized the practice of gender-crossing. Certain short stories, for example, casually exhibited characters who dressed up in the opposite gender. In the serialized detective thriller, “To Die Twice,” one of the male characters is disguised as a woman to carry out his/her various spying missions. The narrator states, “This young woman is, in fact, the beggar at the club. She is a man dressed up as either a woman or some other form, an investigator for the party...” (p.400).<sup>128</sup> The protagonist’s absence throughout the covert operation leads many to consider him either missing or dead. His “second” death, the real one, takes place when his undercover identity is broken. In the serialized novella “The Heroes of Tieu Son” (“Tieu Son Trang Sĩ”),<sup>129</sup> Khai Hung likewise provides an episode in which women dress up as men in the historical backdrop of the Tay Son wars.<sup>130</sup> In their perilous

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Quốc Chi, “Chết Hai Lần: Trinh Tham Tiểu Thuyết, Số 31 (to Die Twice: A Detective Novel, No. 31),” Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal] 128 (1936). (The original quotation: “Người con gái này chính là đứa ăn mày ở bộ câu-lạc ban nay đó. Nó là đàn ông, giả bạn đàn bà hoặc nhiều hình khác, chính là viên điều tra”) (p.400).

<sup>129</sup> Hung, Khai. “Tiêu Sơn Tráng Sĩ (The Heros of Tieu Son).” Phong Hóa (Mores) 147 (1935): 7-8.

<sup>130</sup> In the late seventeenth century, “Vietnam” as we know it today was politically divided by ruling clans: the Confucianized Trinh family dominated the north, while the syncretic Nguyen lords, the south. In 1771, this two hundred-year political division came to a sudden end when the Tay Son rebellion erupted. This mass peasant upheaval led by three brothers, according to Alexander Woodside, marks the inauguration of “modern” Vietnamese history because the Tay Son led to “extensive involvement of Westerners in Vietnamese politics for the first time” (3). While the Tay Sons defeated the Trinh in the north, Nguyen Phuc Anh, exiled in Siam or present-day Thailand, attacked the Tay Son. With the aid of French sailors, soldiers, and ecclesiastics, Anh defeated the Tay Sons unifying the three regions in 1802, almost sixty years before French conquest. See Li Tana, Nguyen Cochinchina: Southern

mission across the countryside, one of the women is disguised as a monk and the other as a prince. In describing these characters, Khai Hung captures the androgynous blending of masculine and feminine traits. He writes:

Although his countenance fell slightly short of that of the monk, the prince was still very handsome, with glistening phoenix eyes, semi-circular eyebrows, with two pinkish white cheeks and with lips that curved into a charming smile. That is nothing unusual because the monk and the prince were none other than young women dressed in men's clothes (p.6).

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Tuy về dung nhan [countenance] có kém nhà sư ấy đôi chút, nhưng chàng công tử cũng là một người rất đẹp trai, với cặp mắt phượng long lanh, đôi lông mày bán nguyệt, với hai má trắng hồng và cái mồm cười có duyên. Sự đó chẳng có chi lạ, vì nhà sư và công tử chỉ là hai người thiếu phụ cải nam trang (p.6).

Of course, the story-line does take place in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century, and it remains unclear whether the novella accurately reflects the sexual norms of that era.

Nevertheless, one can reasonably claim that the ambiguity of the 1930s sexual discourse permitted if not encouraged Khai Hung to include quite casually these gender-crossing characters.

The topos of gender-crossing arguably plays an even larger role in his most famous and controversial piece *Butterfly Soul Dreaming of an Immortal* (Hồn Buồm Mơ Tiên) [1933]. Serialized as one of the first literary works published in the periodical *These Days* (Ngày Nay) by the Self-Strengthening Literary Group, the novella centers on the gender identity of the protagonist Lan, a woman dressed as a monk at the Long Giang temple. The story tells of her encounter with Ngoc, a young man from Hanoi. Struck by Lan's "handsome" features, the fair skin, sweet voice, Ngoc is suspicious that Lan may in fact be a woman, and so makes sexual overtures to force disclosure of her identity. Without considering the question of gender, traditional cultural critics today interpret this story primarily as a transcendent heterosexual romance or brush it off as another sentimental novel lacking revolutionary political bite.<sup>131</sup>

Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to survey comprehensively the story's critical reception, I wish merely to point out that the character of Lan embodies the fantasy that Nguyen Thi Kiem considered impossible. One could say that the practice of "gender crossing," as Kiem understood it, is doubly realized. Khai Hung, a male writer, writes about the experience of a woman who, in turn, impersonates a man.<sup>132</sup> By changing her clothes and behavior, Lan

*Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1998), Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of the Nguyen and Ching Civil Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

<sup>131</sup> Ha Minh Duc, ed., *Tự Lực Văn Đoàn: Trào Lưu - Tác Giả (Self Strengthening Literary Group: Movement and Authors)* (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Giáo Dục (Education Publishers), 2007).

<sup>132</sup> Many readers have noted that Khai Hung's novel parallels the eighteenth-century popular narrative *Quan Am Thi Kinh*, the Buddhist "Goddess of Mercy." This 786-line anonymous verse recounts the life of Thi Kinh who, dressed as a man, seeks refuge at a temple. On a visit to the pagoda, Thi-Mau, the daughter of a rich landlord, immediately falls in love with the so-called monk and attempts to seduce him. When Thi-Mau later becomes impregnated by another man, she blames her condition on Thi Kinh. The truth of the matter is revealed only after Thi Kinh dies and her body is discovered to be female. This story differs from Khai Hung's in several key ways. First, the seducer is another woman; in Khai Hung, it is another man. Second, Khai Hung writes in the novelistic form. Like others that first appeared in twentieth-century Viet Nam, his novel injects a subjective dimension previously unheard of in the pre-modern era. Third, according to the critic Nguyen Dinh Hoa, the eighteenth century popular narrative emphasized the triumph of moral righteousness (97-98). Thi Kinh's "true" gender serves, ultimately, to reveal her

transgresses the supposedly immutable limits of gender identity and consummates a public fantasy. The critic Vu Ngoc Phan cites that Khai Hung's audience comprised mostly of young female readers (31).<sup>133</sup>

In their assimilation of the dominant cultural logic and desire for so-called male attributes, Ms. Kiem and the heroine Lan, one could argue, remain unwittingly conservative in affirming the masculine pole of the gender dyad and, in so doing, reproducing the societal hierarchy of power. This conclusion, however, need not follow. Indeed, it derives from a slightly static notion of gender identity that presupposes power's immobility. Rather than dismiss these documents as evidence of mere assimilation, they could be interpreted in more dynamic ways. Ms. Kiem and her desire to write like a "man," after all, may derive less from her envy to be one than recognition of the power conferred on masculine gender. Or, alternatively, the desire to assume the opposite gender, a kind of transgender operation, can also be seen as liberating. Examining cultural debates concerning transsexuals, Judith Butler writes that the operation is not "necessarily to stay within the binary frame of gender, but to engage transformation itself as the meaning of gender." Echoing Simone de Beauvoir, Butler continues, "If one is not born a woman but rather becomes one, then becoming is the vehicle for gender itself" (65).<sup>134</sup> In the case of Nguyen Thi Kiem and the heroine Lan, becoming a *man* is the transformative occasion for gender itself. Regardless of which interpretation one seeks to defend, my point is still to illustrate the remarkable preoccupation with gender plasticity. Perhaps because definitions of gender identity during this time were, more or less, undergoing contestation, there was a space for the play and semblance of gender and sexual constitution.

#### *Half-Male, Half-Female and other Gender Ambiguities*

Another group of documents was preoccupied with the figure of the hermaphrodite or androgyne. Like the "bearded women" articles, these documents reflect not only the open-minded and curious attitude of the former ones, but also leap towards other kinds of abstract visions of society most notably the ideals of compassion and social justice.

Consider the tone of one of the earliest articles in the vernacular reporting on the decline of the Chinese imperial eunuchs. The opening statement notes, "The human species is divided into two dispositions (*sexe*), the male and female. Yet strangely enough there is occasionally the hermaphrodite." The article continues, "[T]his hermaphrodite species according to the East Asian political regimes helped to assist the king, better known as the eunuch."<sup>135</sup> The writer then recounts the impact of these eunuchs in various Chinese imperial intrigues noting how influential they became, sometimes, dangerously so. Yet, the writer immediately stresses, "Whatever the case, they are still a **species of our humanity**, and we should be aware of their painful plights" (my emphasis) ["Có gì đi nữa, **họ cũng là một giống người với ta**, cái tình-cảnh đau-thương của

innocence rather than demonstrate romantic love or the play of gender transgression. See Nguyen Dinh Hoa, *Vietnamese Literature: A Brief Survey* (San Diego: San Diego State University, 1994), John Schafer and Cao Thi Nhu Quynh, "From Verse Narrative to the Novel: The Development of Prose Fiction in Vietnam," *Journal of Asian Studies* 47.4 (1988).

<sup>133</sup> Vu Ngoc Phan, "Nha Van Hien Dai (Modern Writers)," *Vu Ngoc Phan Tuyen Tap (Selected Works of Vu Ngoc Phan)*, eds. Nguyen Thi Hanh and Nguyen Hong Hanh (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Van Hoc (Literature Publishing House), 2008).

<sup>134</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>135</sup> Chương Dân, "Tình Hình Sinh Hoạt Của Bọn Hoạn Quan Sau Khi Nền Quân Chủ Bị Úp Đổ (the Circumstances of Palace Eunuchs after the Demise of the Monarch)," *Phu Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 91 (1931).

(The original quotation: "Loài người chia ra hai tánh (*sexe*), là nam và nữ. Vậy mà thỉnh-thoảng lại có thứ phi nam phi nữ nữa mới lạ cho...Giống người phi nam phi nữ ấy, theo chế độ mấy nước phương Đông ta ngày trước, chuyên sung vào việc hầu-hạ chôn cung vua, kêu là hoạn-quan hoặc thái giám.")

họ, ta cũng nên biết qua mới phải] (archaic spelling in original).<sup>136</sup> It is questionable to assume, as the article does, whether the figure of the hermaphrodite can be conflated with that of the imperial eunuch by virtue of their shared inability to reproduce. But regardless of this technicality, the point is that the attitude towards the hermaphroditic figure is characterized not so much by corporeal “deviancy” or a “dynamics of displacement” as by compassion. In some sense, this passage anticipates certain queer theoretical interventions on rethinking the limits and contours of the “human” in its historical specificity.<sup>137</sup> Finally, perhaps in a separate study, it may be worthwhile to speculate on whether this ethos of “compassion” is also culturally related to the scene of Mr. Phung’s “empathy.”

In any case, during the late 1920s through the mid-1930s, the androgyne figure was also appropriated for other political ends including but not limited to the women’s emancipation movement. Speculating on humankind’s androgynous origins, for example, one article reprinted a translated excerpt of Anatole France’s *Histoire Comique*. The writer states in the preface, “According to today’s scientists, the ancestors of humankind were apes. Yet, in the narrative republished below, our origins can be traced to the **Androgynes...**” (word and emphasis in original). In a footnote, the author explains, “Perhaps because the Androgyne is comprised of half-man and half-woman, the French call their wives *ma moitié* because men come from the other half of the Androgyne.”<sup>138</sup> As with any myth, this one can be interpreted in a number of ways. In the cultural context of the times, the author was probably implying that since men and women derive from the same androgyne figure, they therefore ought to be granted the same kinds of political rights.

This theory was propagated by other writers as well because it provided a convenient rhetorical idiom in which to oppose certain patriarchal ideologies according to which women’s life purpose was reduced to reproduction. In another article, for instance, the author begins by acknowledging this patriarchal reproductive paradigm. There is another theory, the writer states, in which women are *not* derivative of the “race of men,” but co-belong to another one—the “androgynous race.” The ancestors of another male race destroyed this prior androgynous race creating sexual difference. The writer explains, “One line of theory believes that women are not men’s reproductive machines; long ago women came from the same race [as men] and that is why men’s and women’s bodies were previously not as different as they are today.”<sup>139</sup> If the “origins” of people’s bodies are the same, so the logic goes, the social inequality that “civilized men” have created for women is, therefore, contrary to this prelapsarian “Nature.”

But if some writers were reaching to the past to justify the gender emancipation movement, so there were others who reached towards the future to achieve the same goals. The public had already been exposed to the androgyne figure in a number of venues: in an investigation about a “hermaphroditic” Buddhist nun;<sup>140</sup> special news series about the world’s

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid, p.9

<sup>137</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*.

<sup>138</sup> Tung Giang, “Chuyện Cổ Phương Tây: Góc Tích Đàn Bà Và Đàn Ông (a Western Mythology: On the Origins of Men and Women),” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 81 (1930).

<sup>139</sup> QT, “Đàn Bà [Women],” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 249 (1934). The original quotation: “Có một cái thuyết khác... nói rằng đàn bà không phải là con mái của đàn ông; xưa kia bạn của đàn bà vốn là cùng giống, cùng nòi, cho nên thân thể nam với nữ không khác nhau nhiều như ngày nay.”

<sup>140</sup> Huân Minh, “Một Tiếng Đồng Hồ Với Cô Vải Bút (an Hour with a Self-Declared 'Nun')” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 198 (1933).

“strange” women;<sup>141</sup> reports about hermaphroditic sea organisms;<sup>142</sup> another piece on Russian experiments with autogenic eggs;<sup>143</sup> an article on the existence of hermaphrodites in Vietnam’s diverse animal world ;<sup>144</sup> a front-cover photograph in the *Science Journal*;<sup>145</sup> and finally, a two-part series on the scientific classification of different human hermaphrodites.<sup>146</sup> As a result, some speculated whether advances in science and technology would someday turn *all* of us into androgynes.<sup>147</sup> The latter piece was a response to the findings by two German scientists E. Wolff and A. Ginglinger who, according to the Vietnamese article, found a mechanism to induce artificially the production of hermaphrodites. The article concludes, “Someday all of humanity will be able to transform into half-male and half-female.” Imagining a world in which humankind would have no other worries except eating and working, the writer continues, “[T]he latter species will have been liberated from the precariousness of Nature” (p.139).<sup>148</sup> Although it is unclear how precisely the androgyne achieves this “liberation” and contributes to this utopia, the figure may embody a future in which society’s gender distinctions and inequalities will have been eradicated. This interpretation is bolstered by the publication of a short story entitled “A Philosophical Science Novel: Tomorrow.” Serialized in fourteen parts, the story depicts the adventures of a protagonist by the name of “Van-Minh” (“Civilization”) who finds himself suddenly in a futuristic Vietnam in the year 2936 where the distinctions between the sexes are now blurred. The narrator observes, “The reason he [the protagonist] could not distinguish right away their gender is that they resembled men.” The narrator further writes, “Minh suddenly encountered a group of people who were at once male and female...he realized that the women he saw previously...were hermaphrodites” (p.560). (“Thình lình Minh bị một toán người vừa đàn ông, vừa đàn bà...chàng vẫn yên trí những người đàn bà kia...là những người ái nam, ái nữ”).<sup>149</sup> Throughout the story, Mr. Minh finds himself sexually attracted to one of the hermaphroditic figures, Thanh Huong. The latter, in turn, observes, “Long ago, society’s belief in the two sexes, male and female, was mistaken in presuming that women were completely women, men completely men...the truth is otherwise. There are some women who are very women-like and there are those who aren’t at all.” She concludes, “[P]erhaps someday we shall produce people who are neither ‘men nor women’” (Có lẽ, một ngày kia chúng tôi sẽ có thể tạo nên những người

<sup>141</sup> VA, "Đàn Bà Quái Lạ: Trên Đồi: Người Bán Nam, Bán Nữ; Cô Ngó Hình Như Con Beo, Người Ta Gọi Là 'Femme Panthère; Một Cô Gây Đòn Bằng Cẳng, Phần 3 (Strange Women in the World: A Half Man, Half Woman; a Woman Who Looks Like a Panther, People Call Her 'Femme Panthère; Another Woman Who Plucks the Guitar Using Her Feet, Part 3)."

<sup>142</sup> Bích Thủy, "Món Quà Trong Lúc Nghỉ Hè: Dưới Biển, Trên Rừng [a Gift During Summer Break: Under the Sea and in the Jungle]," *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 251 (1934).

<sup>143</sup> [NoAuthor], "Cuộc Thí Nghiệm Kỳ Khô (a Strange Experiment)," *Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal]* 119 (1936).

<sup>144</sup> Bản Quán, "Những Sự Kỳ Quán Trong Vũ Trụ Xét Thấy Ở Nước Nam (Strange and Unusual Phenomena in the Country of Nam)," *Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal]* 43 (1933).

<sup>145</sup> [NoAuthor], "Bán Nam Bán Nữ (Half Man, Half Woman)," *Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal]* 76 (1934).

<sup>146</sup> Công Ích, "Bán Nam Bán Nữ, Phần 2 (Half Man, Half Woman, Part 2)," *Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal]* 77 (1934), Công Ích, "Bán Nam Bán Nữ: Hermaphroditisme, Phần 1 (Half Man, Half Woman: Hermaphroditism, Part 1)," *Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal]* 77 (1934).

<sup>147</sup> [NoAuthor], "Rồi Đây Khoa Học Sẽ Tạo Ra Những Người Bán Nam Bán Nữ (Science Will Some Day Create Half-Men, Half-Women)" *Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal]* 115 (1936).

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Chung Anh, "Khoa Học Triết Lý Tiểu Thuyết: Ngày Mai, Số 2 (Philosophical Science Novel: Tomorrow, No.2)," *Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal]* 136 (1936).

‘không nam mà không nữ’” (p.20).<sup>150</sup> The implications of this utopia are far-reaching: not only are homo- and bisexual desires culturally viable options but also social markers to be transcended wherein the distinctions of the sexes and their accompanying inequalities are abolished altogether.

Indeed, this latter idea departs in some ways from its European counterparts. In her study of the “New Women” on the Continent, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg writes that this group re-appropriated the sexual rhetoric of the medical establishment only to use this rhetoric against it. She explains, “This rhetoric represented New Women as social and sexual hermaphrodites, as an ‘intermediate sex’ that existed between and thus outside of the biological and social order.” Smith-Rosenberg continues, “Investing male images with feminist meanings, they sought to use male myths to repudiate male power—to turn the male world upside down” (p.265).<sup>151</sup> The inversion of the hierarchy is a strategy some Vietnamese may have adopted. But, as the prior story suggests, others also envisioned perhaps an even more radical utopia. In this utopia, the hierarchy is neither simply inverted, producing effectively another hierarchy, nor conceived as “sex-blind,” changing the ocular field but retaining sexual difference; rather, the differentiation of the sexes is abolished altogether—a “sex-less” society.<sup>152</sup>

Moreover, as the story indicates, in this utopia, there is neither formal marriage nor the nuclear family. Rather, affective relationships are freely entered at will. Upon discovering this news, Mr. Minh cries, “What! You guys don’t have families?” (“Sao! Các anh không có gia đình?”), to which the hermaphrodite Thanh Huong responds, “This society has also eliminated another custom of the previous century. When a woman wishes to live with her lover, the two simply take an oath with each other.” S/he continues, “The two love each other and do not need formal vows”<sup>153</sup> (p.19). Hence, in some ways, this story presents not only a radical interrogation of gender emancipation but also a reconfiguration of society’s fundamental kinship structures not unlike Phan Van Hum’s idea of the abolition of the nuclear family. In all cases, these androgyne documents problematize the claim that, in this period, a mutually exclusive hetero- and homosexual division had achieved cultural hegemony. Rather these documents suggest that this division more likely co-existed alongside other sexual configurations, lending further weight to the argument that a deep sense of sexual ambivalence was in the air.

#### *Sex Changes and the Frontiers of Reproductive Science*

Further evidence of sexual ambivalence comes from another group of documents that thematize the question of animal and human sex changes. One of the earliest articles on this subject published in 1931 and entitled, “Changing One Sexual Organ for Another”<sup>154</sup> reported on the results of some experiments by nineteenth and twentieth-century sexologists including Hunter, Berchtold, Pézard, Morris and Steinach. One outcome of these experiments, according to the Vietnamese article, is the identification of the functional role of the sex glands. When a “bag of eggs” were inserted into some castrated chickens, the latter were able to reproduce once again.

<sup>150</sup> Chung Anh, “Khoa Học Triết Lý Tiểu Thuyết: Ngày Mai, Số 11 (Philosophical Science Novel: Tomorrow, No.11),” *Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal]* 145 (1937).

<sup>151</sup> Smith-Rosenberg, “Discourses of Sexuality and Subjectivity: The New Woman, 1870-1936.”

<sup>152</sup> This interpretation of a “sex-less” society is slightly different from Marie Louise Roberts’ study of a like phenomenon in France where a “civilization without sexes” signified apocalyptic anxieties in the aftermath of World War I. See Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917-1927*, *Women in Culture and Society*, ed. Catharine R. Stimpson (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994).

<sup>153</sup> Anh, “Khoa Học Triết Lý Tiểu Thuyết: Ngày Mai, Số 11 (Philosophical Science Novel: Tomorrow, No.11).”

<sup>154</sup> Vân Anh, “Chuyện Khoa Học Nên Biết: Thay Đầu Vật Nay Qua Vật Kia (a Science Issue Worth Knowing: Changing One Sexual Organs for Another),” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 90 (1931).

More significantly, when Steinach placed the “bag of eggs” into a castrated cock, the latter suddenly starting forming “female” characteristics—its “breasts enlarged and when it approached other cocks, it was sexually aroused” (“mà con đực này tự nhiên biến ra có tánh chất con cái; vú nó lớn ra, mà tới gần con đực khác, xem ra cũng động tình” [archaic spelling in original]) (p.11).<sup>155</sup> To make this experiment more vivid to readers, at the center of the article is a picture of two chickens. The caption explains:

The two chickens before the reader are both grown cocks, each about 2 years of age. At first glance, the one on the left is, without a doubt, a hen. But strangely that is not the case. Previously it was a cock, just like the one on the right, except that scientists were able to insert a bag of eggs in it, and then it transformed its colors and feathers, and became a hen, just as it appears before the reader (p.10).

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Hai cái gà mà độc-giả thấy hình đây, đều là thứ gà trống lớn, cỡ 2 tuổi. Con bên tay trái, mới ngó ai chẳng bảo là gà mái, song kỳ thiệt không phải; lúc trước nó cũng là gà trống như con bên tay mặt vậy, có đều nhà khoa-học làm cách để bọc-trứng vào cho nó, rồi nó biến đổi từ cái mào cho tới lông, mà thành ra gà mái, như ta thấy đó (p.10).

One has to wonder about the ease with which normative judgments are passed off as unadulterated, “scientific” fact in performing these kinds of experiments--the degree to which the writer has projected his or her own anthropomorphic anxieties onto the vagaries of the animal world, much the same way as, according to some scholars, contemporary reproductive science has created a heterosexual “romance” between the egg and sperm.<sup>156</sup> At any rate, despite the male to female sex operation on the animals in question, the overall response of this writer parallels that of the “bearded women” and “adrogyné” documents in her curious wonder about science’s unknown potential. Consider the way in which s/he opens the article by asking, “Today people now have a way of exchanging the...reproductive organs of one species for another; able to make the elderly look young; perhaps one day people will be able to find the elixir of life?” (p.9). In her conclusion, the writer acknowledges the disbelief of some of her readers and comments, “Many people today may be skeptical, but not the Euro-American scientists and the heights of their imagination.”<sup>157</sup> Of course, we now know that since Francis Bacon’s seventeenth-century publication of the *Novum Organum*, which privileged the British empiricist method, science’s ability to master Nature’s role in the twentieth century has led to a far more ominous outcome.<sup>158</sup> In the context of this passage and its cultural milieu, however, the writer demonstrates an unusual receptivity towards science’s infinite potential to plumb the depths of the unknown and reach the heights of the imagination—including but not limited to the search for immortality. Hence, I underscore once again the overall inquisitive, indeed optimistic, disposition of this document.

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Martin, “The Egg and Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles.”

<sup>157</sup> The original quotation: “Ngày nay tuy có nhiều người không tin, chớ những nhà bác-học ở Âu-Mỹ có cái mộng-tưởng tới như vậy lận” [irregular spelling in original] (p.11). Anh, “Chuyện Khoa Học Nên Biết: Thay Đầu Vật Nay Qua Vật Kia (a Science Issue Worth Knowing: Changing One Sexual Organs for Another).”

<sup>158</sup> Heidegger has suggested that this cognitive mode, hegemonic in the modern period, blinds us, fundamentally, from other ways of knowing and understanding, in his words, we become “enframed” [*Gestell* in the German]. See Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

Consider another piece on the strange case of a Chinese man who was reportedly capable of giving birth. Like the prior article, this one exhibits the same attitude of openness to news of unusual events in the natural world. A twenty-three year old young man by the name of “Lin-A-li” in the region of Yuen-Tso-wei in the Guangdong province of southwestern China gave birth to a baby boy.<sup>159</sup> As the article acknowledges, many locals in the province were, at first, skeptical. Some readers today, in fact, may dismiss this story as impossible. The “laws” of nature cannot be changed. But, as Thomas Laqueur has demonstrated, in the human sciences, unlike mathematics, “nature” and the “laws” so-called are processed through a historical and cultural grid often unbeknownst to the agent of interpretation.<sup>160</sup> Or, alternatively, the lulling effects of an increasingly standardized society can also foreclose the imaginings of other subcultural lives and biological variation: in our present time, this kind of story is not as far-fetched if one considers that the “man” in question is transgendered.<sup>161</sup> In Vietnam during this period, the journal *These Days* (Ngày Nay) also published a cartoon of a pregnant man. The caption reads: “Oh! Who Says Men Cannot Give Birth!”<sup>162</sup> This unusual news item caught the imagination of a Vietnamese reporter. The anonymous writer states, “What a strange news story, something that has been unheard of; since time immemorial, reproduction has been a function that Nature has left to the female species. Yet, today we have the story of a man who can give birth. How very odd!”<sup>163</sup> (p.4). Once again, the writer may find the story “unusual,” “odd” or even spectacular, but in no way employs a pathologizing or criminalizing rhetoric. Once again, whatever kind of “queer” effect that the text may produce, whether unintentional or not, is tempered by a moment of humility and awe in a cultural milieu in which scientific innovation challenged conventional truths and, in so doing, brought about a crisis of knowledge and norms.

This attitude of humility and awe is reflected in the cluster of other articles on this same subject. One news item reported on the story of “Henriette Acces” who transformed into a man;<sup>164</sup> another speculated on science’s ability someday to allow people to undergo this process at will;<sup>165</sup> yet another attempted to account for the make-up of human gender through Pézard’s chicken sex-swapping experiments;<sup>166</sup> another continued the discussion of these experiments but also made mention of Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld’s taxonomy of human sexuality;<sup>167</sup> yet another on the adventures of Maryse Choisy who disguised herself as a man to investigate an all-male Greek

<sup>159</sup> [NoAuthor], “Một Người Đàn Ông Đẻ Con (a Man Who Gives Birth),” Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News) 193 (1933).

<sup>160</sup> Laqueur, Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud.

<sup>161</sup> See Barbara Walters’ recent special report on a transgendered man who gives birth. “Pregnant Man Expecting Second Child.” <<http://abcnews.go.com/Health/Story?id=6244878&page=1>> November 13, 2008; Also, Halberstam, In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives.

<sup>162</sup> [NoAuthor], “Ô! Ai Bảo Đàn Ông Không Đẻ (Oh! Who Says Men Cannot Give Birth?),” Phong Hóa (Mores) 146 (1935).

<sup>163</sup> [NoAuthor], “Một Người Đàn Ông Đẻ Con (a Man Who Gives Birth).”

<sup>164</sup> [NoAuthor], “Con Gái Hóa Con Trai (a Girl Transforms into a Boy),” Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal] 81 (1934).

<sup>165</sup> [NoAuthor], “Chuyện Lạ Của Khoa Học: Rời Đây Đàn Bà Có Thể Biến Thành Đàn Ông Chẳng? [an Unusual Scientific Phenomenon: Will Women Some Day Be Able to Transform into a Man?],” Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News) 236 (1934).

<sup>166</sup> Hữu Sào, “Tại Sao Đàn Ông Rậm Râu, Đàn Bà to Vú? (Why Do Men Have Beards and Women Large Breasts?),” Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal] 93 (1935).

<sup>167</sup> Hiền Kỳ, “Tại Sao Đàn Ông Có Râu, Đàn Bà Tóc Dài (Why Do Men Have Beards, Women Long Hair?),” Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal] 108 (1935).

island;<sup>168</sup> another on the effects of hormones used to manipulate the sex determination of chickens;<sup>169</sup> another provided a front-page picture followed by an in-depth report of a Ms. “Zdeneck Konbek” who transformed into a man;<sup>170</sup> another reported on the case of a German father who raised his daughter as a boy, boy as a daughter and each behaved according to the gender norms that he and she were raised, respectively;<sup>171</sup> yet another reported on an Italian family of boys who transformed into girls.<sup>172</sup> This list is intended to provide a sample of news items demonstrating unsettled fixed ideas about sex and gender.

Indeed, as late as 1937, despite the bevy of articles already published on this subject, the editors of *These Days* [*Ngay Nay*] re-published and translated a French article from the Parisian magazine *Lu et Vu* concerning the possibility of sex change operations, once again, in chickens. The article then asked whether this change was possible in human beings and concluded that sex operations were the frontiers of reproductive science.<sup>173</sup> These documents, therefore, serve to reinforce the palpable belief in the plasticity of gender, the body and the latter’s unknown possibilities.

### Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that in the 1930s the cultural discourse in Vietnam imagined the gendered and sexual body to be far more dynamic than has been supposed. This was a period that witnessed the decline of an older generation of scholar-gentry and the emergence of a younger cohort of intellectuals, many of whom had just returned from their studies in France. This younger generation signified a rupture with the prior generation in their relative amnesia about the East Asian cultural past, a direct consequence of the French’s deliberate effacement of the Confucian imperial exams and replacement by a second-tier Franco-Annamite educational system. At the same time, this new system facilitated the younger generation’s proficiency in the French language and access to European ideas and worldviews. The early 1930s stood at the crossroads of these two generations: the legacy of the East Asian tradition’s sexual discourse converged with the rise of new genders and bodies emanating from modern cultural shifts in Europe in the wake of World War I. The Vietnamese exposure to these traditions resulted in an expansion of the normative limits of the gendered and sexual body.

Whereas scholars, such as David Marr, Shawn McHale and Hue-Tam Ho-Tai, tend to locate this period as the genesis of the modern Vietnamese women’s liberation movement, they give short shrift to the historical articulation of the textured and polyvalent meaning of gender itself. As a result, they have plotted a narrative that collapses the history of gender emancipation to that of heterosexual dimorphism, submerging in the process other histories that reveal a far more complex meaning of gender. From stories about army women disguised as men; women who possessed beards; women who attempted to undertake “masculine” writing; cases of cross-

<sup>168</sup> TV, “Trên Đồi Này Có Một Xứ Không Cho Đàn Bà Và Cho Cái Bướm Cẳng Đền [a Place Where Women Are Forbidden to Set Foot],” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 220 (1933).

<sup>169</sup> HK, “Có Thể Biết Trước Được Trứng Nào Sẽ Nở Ra Gà Sổng Gà Mái Không? (Is It Possible to Predict the Egg's Sex?),” *Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal]* 99 (1935).

<sup>170</sup> [NoAuthor], “Đàn Bà Hóa Đàn Ông (a Woman Transforms into a Man),” *Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal]* 115 (1936).

<sup>171</sup> Đồng, “Ảnh Hưởng Của Giáo Dục Và Hoàn Cảnh Hay Là Một Sự Thí Nghiệm Rất Lạ Lùng Ở Đức [Societal Influence and Upbringing or a Strange Experiment in Germany]” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 236 (1934).

<sup>172</sup> [NoAuthor], “Nam Hóa Nữ (a Man Transforms into a Woman),” *Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal]* 147 (1937).

<sup>173</sup> translator T.A., “Những Cái Mầu Nhiệm Của Khoa Học: Người Ta Có Thể Đổi Giống Được, Cái Được (the Miracles of Science: People Can Change Male, Female Genders),” *Ngay Nay (These Days)* 82 (1937).

dressings in literary works; hermaphrodites who embodied a transcendence of sexual dimorphism; to accounts of sex changes and the unknown frontiers of reproductive science, these documents all lend interpretive weight to the claim that the gendered and sexual body was imagined to be open to different modalities of becoming. In the next chapter, we shall examine more closely documents that specifically address the interconnected question of same-sex sexual relations and their normative status within colonial Vietnamese society.

## CHAPTER 2. The Uneven Emergence of Sexuality

Colonization offers the spectacle of a wide field open to the most dubious appetites abandoned to a boundless exploitation.<sup>1</sup>

--*L'Annam*, April 28, 1927

It [Inversion] is remarkably widespread among many savage and primitive races, whereas the concept of degeneracy is restricted to states of high civilization...<sup>2</sup>

--Freud, "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," 1905

[T]here is quite a strange history here. How disciplinary schemas were both applied and refined in the colonial populations should be examined in some detail.<sup>3</sup>

--Foucault, *Psychiatric Power*

[T]wo words can summarize all the progress made under the guidance of our protectors: no school although everywhere you can see opium dens and alcohol distributors... No intellectuals, but as many pimps and opium addicts as possible. If such a spectacle does not open the eyes of the Vietnamese, that is because some mean god has blinded them...<sup>4</sup>

--*La Cloche Fêlée*, March 18, 1926

Scholars have identified two different but overarching kinds of sexological discourse that circulated in nineteenth-century Europe. The first kind, an anatomical lexicon, was dominant more or less in the first half of that century. In this discourse, physiological anatomy exhausted, and hence determined, one's sexual identity. So medical scientists would search the body for visible proof of its sex by examining its contours, its orifices, its genitalia or lack thereof. This particular paradigm of surveillance and regulation was made famous, in part, by Foucault's study of the nineteenth-century French hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin.<sup>5</sup> The second kind of discourse, a psychiatric notion, which arose in tandem with the rise of certain medical institutions, predominated in the second half of that century and, arguably, well through much of the twentieth and the present. The latter paradigm gave rise to the concept of "sexuality" according to which a field of psychology and a psychological disposition were attached to sexual identity. Hence, towards the end of the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century, French medical psychiatrists identified a series of sexual disorders that were labeled as "perversions"--symptomatic "vices" that helped define the effeminacy of gay men and masculinity of lesbians,

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted in Truong Buu Lam, *Colonialism Experienced: Vietnamese Writings on Colonialism, 1900-1931* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2000): p.97

<sup>2</sup> "Sexual Aberrations," p.5. See Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, ed. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1962 [1905]).

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power, Lectures at the Collège De France*, ed. Arnold Davidson (New York: Picador, 2006 ): p.68-9

<sup>4</sup> As quoted in Lam, *Colonialism Experienced: Vietnamese Writings on Colonialism, 1900-1931*: p.84

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, *Herculine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, trans. Richard McDougal (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

now famously known as the “elementary inversion” of the so-called normal qualities of sexual difference (p.32).<sup>6</sup>

Arnold Davidson, a philosopher of the history of science, has emphasized that these two different notions of sexual identity represent powerfully distinct and shifting epistemologies, what he calls “style[s] of reasoning” (p.36).<sup>7</sup> These styles of reasoning are slightly different in character from forms of reason subject to validity claims. Prior to the emergence of psychiatry and its attendant style of reasoning, “sexuality” as a disorder could not even be considered true or false because it was not articulated in an epistemological frame that would make it possible to be a candidate for truth in the first place. “Only with the birth of a psychiatric style of reasoning,” Davidson explains, “were there categories of evidence, verification, explanation, and so on, that allowed such theories to be true-or-false” (p.36).<sup>8</sup> Sexuality, in other words, emerged as an object of clinical knowledge only through the eventual dominance of psychiatry which, paradoxically, produced the very object it sought to control.<sup>9</sup> Foucault would later famously characterize nineteenth-century Europe as the period when a regime of sexuality emerged: the fields of medicine, psychiatry and pedagogy began to converge and “solidify,” especially in the writings of sexologist such as Richard von-Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis, among others, who linked systems of knowledge with forms of sexual experience.<sup>10</sup> In this regime, sex was no longer an arbitrary feature of human life but, as Foucault explains, a “fictitious unity” that aligns anatomical elements, gender, desire, and psyche into a principle of identity.<sup>11</sup>

In this chapter, I propose to examine the relative influence of this sexual regime in the context of Vietnam between 1930 and 1940 and shall argue that this regime reaches its limit in the colony. If this regime did exert a demonstrable influence in the late colonial period, a period when French culture would presumably have made its strongest impact, then we ought to be able to find evidence of the regime’s profound effects in a variety of key cultural and discursive sites, including medicine, psychiatry and psychoanalysis; we ought to be able to observe, in particular, the dominance of the sexological discourse that linked homosexuality with gender inversion.

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<sup>6</sup> Robert A. Nye, “Sex Difference and Male Homosexuality in French Medical Discourse, 1830-1930,” Homosexuality and Medicine, Health, and Science, eds. Wayne R. Dynes and Stephen Donaldson, vol. 9 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992 [1989]).

<sup>7</sup> Arnold I. Davidson, “Sex and the Emergence of Sexuality,” The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> For further discussion of this question, see Butler, “Sexual Inversions.” Butler argues: “[A] juridical view of power as constraint or *external* control, turns out to be--**all along**--performing a fully different ruse of power; silently, it is *already productive* power, forming the very object that will be suitable for control and then, in an act that effectively disavows that production, claiming to discover that ‘sex’ outside of power. Hence, the category of ‘sex’ will be precisely what power produces in order to have an object of control” (p.87, my emphasis). For a stunning corroboration of Butler’s interpretation (thirteen years later with the publication of the *Lectures*), Foucault writes that both juridical and disciplinary powers worked simultaneously: “We could say, if you like, that there is a kind of **juridico-disciplinary pincers** of individualism. There is the juridical individual as he appears in these philosophical or juridical theories...And then, **beneath this, alongside it**, there was the development of a whole disciplinary technology that produced individual as an historical reality” (p.57, my emphasis). See Foucault, Psychiatric Power, Lectures at the Collège De France.

<sup>10</sup> Writing on the constitution of a “great archive of the pleasures of sex,” Foucault explains that this archive emerged when “medicine, psychiatry, and pedagogy began to solidify” (p.63). Foucault continues: “Campe, Salzmann, and especially Kaan, Krafft-Ebing, Tardieu, Molle, and Havelock Ellis carefully assembled this whole pitiful, lyrical outpouring from the sexual mosaic...Western societies...established a system of classification” (p.64). Foucault, History of Sexuality, Vol 1.

<sup>11</sup> Foucault, History of Sexuality, Vol 1: p. 154.

Yet, when I traced the varied forms that the Vietnamese sexual discourse took in this period, the evidence casts doubt on the pervasive power of this European sexual regime in the colony. Indeed, the evidence will suggest that this period lacked something of a coherent regime that organized and disciplined people's sexual desires, bodies and identities in the image of European sexology.

To demonstrate the limits of this sexual regime, the chapter will be divided into four primary ideas. First, drawing on both secondary and primary sources, I begin by examining the uneven influence of western French medicine on the colony and also the lukewarm reception of psychoanalysis. Second, I compare the sexual vocabulary of this period with those of the contemporary one to expose their historicity or radical alterity. Since the vocabulary of the contemporary period evinces the legacy of this sexological regime, this comparison brings into relief the relatively tepid influence of this regime in the late colonial period. Third, I analyze the contested character of "homosexual love" and compare it to other prevailing modalities of same-sex sexual relations, including sodomy, to show that the normative status of homosexuality remained a subject of contentious debate: whereas European sexology would consider homosexuality a form of perversion, in the Vietnamese colony this judgment was far from clear and decisive. Finally, to drive home the latter point, I conclude with a study of a news-media scandal involving a cross-dressing nun in order to show the persistent separation of homosexuality from gender "inversion." In each case, I underscore the ambivalent status and influence of this European sexual regime on the cultural discourse of late colonial Vietnam.

### **I. Mixed Testimony: the Lukewarm Reception of French Medicine**

Although the fields of western medicine and psychoanalysis exhibit an uneasy historical relation to one another,<sup>12</sup> each is nevertheless part and parcel of the "deployment of sexuality" that Foucault famously identified. Just as western medical interventions functioned to diagnose, classify and pathologize sexed bodies, so psychoanalysis served to shore up this sexual regime's power through confessions by clients about the truth of their sex and sexuality. Foucault explains, "Situated at the point of intersection of a technique of confession and a scientific discursivity, where certain major mechanisms had to be found for adapting them to one another...sexuality was defined as being...a domain susceptible to pathological processes, and hence one calling for a normalizing intervention" (p.68).<sup>13</sup> For Foucault, then, both western medicine and psychoanalysis—as opposed to the *ars erotica*—worked in tandem by providing the techniques necessary to constitute sexuality as a domain subject to control in nineteenth-century Europe. If an analogue sexual regime had existed in the Vietnamese colony, then we ought to be able to locate, among other things, the profound influence of western medical science and psychoanalysis.

Yet, scholars profoundly disagree on the legacy, if any, that French medicine left in colonial Vietnam. Whereas some scholars, such as Laurence Monnais-Rousselot, have demonstrated a systematic expansion of the influence of western medicine,<sup>14</sup> others refute this

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<sup>12</sup> Sander Gilman, for example, has shown how, as a response to the mainstream scientific establishment of the nineteenth-century, Freud attempted to legitimize psychoanalysis by founding a scientific basis to the field. Sander Gilman, *Freud, Race and Gender* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), Sander Gilman, *The Case of Sigmund Freud: Medicine and Identity at the Fin De Siècle* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol 1*.

<sup>14</sup> Laurence Monnais-Rousselot, "In the Shadow of the Colonial Hospital: Developing Health Care in Indochina, 1860-1939," *Viet Nam Exposé: French Scholarship on Twentieth-Century Vietnamese Society*, eds. Gisele Bousquet and Pierre Brocheux (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

claim, insisting instead on a modest intervention.<sup>15</sup> Others like Sokhieng Au and Tran Thi Lien do not dispute the expansionist claim but wish to complicate it: French medicine, according to these scholars, grew in parallel with enduring indigenous ones<sup>16</sup> and even in cases where western medicine did exert its influence, some locals were far more discriminating in the choice of practices they adopted.<sup>17</sup> My own position in this debate is to qualify the relative power of French colonial medicine. In what follows, I shall highlight the relevant points of this debate and then proceed to show, based on my own research, the equally lukewarm reception of psychoanalysis in colonial Vietnam to support my larger argument that this period lacks a coherent sexual regime that disciplined people's desires, bodies and psyches.

*Western Medicine and the Challenges of Influence*

Laurence Monnais-Rousselot is the scholar who has advanced the claim that French colonial medicine penetrated Vietnamese cultural and institutional life. In her study of the French colonial hospital, she has written that the, "[T]otal number of hospitalizations was 7.5 times higher in 1937 than in 1907." She also notes, "Between 1907 and 1937, the number of patients increased almost twenty-five times, and the number of consultations per patient went from 2.7 to 2.3, a stable ratio that also bears witness to the fact that the patient not only called upon the doctor but repeated this action" (p.176).<sup>18</sup> Further, in their study of the colonial pharmaceutical industry, Monnais and Tousignant claim that this industry accelerated precisely during the decade in question. They write, "The indigenization and the ruralization of healthcare in Vietnam led to a readiness to diffuse pharmaceuticals into areas where no other facilities existed... Evidence of this readiness can be found in the creation, in 1920, and rapid development of a network of basic medicines stores [*dépôts de médicaments*], which probably numbered in the hundreds by the late 1930s" (p.10).<sup>19</sup> In a separate article, Laurence Monnais has demonstrated the paradoxical position of French-trained Indochinese doctors who helped spread western medicine in their own native land.<sup>20</sup> Hence, whether in a linear or exponential fashion, the power of medical institutions would seem to have grown explosively in this period, imposing its structures of knowledge and practices including, presumably, its ideas about sexuality on the local people.

This inference, however, need not follow. Careful examination of local sources suggests a different and more complicated narrative. The prior argument seems to imply a top-down mechanism whereby western medical science unilaterally imposed its will to knowledge on the locals who were, in turn, conceived as passive receptacles. In her study of the figure of Henriette Bui, the first western-trained female Vietnamese doctor, Tran Thi Lien insists on the bias of the colonial archive on which the prior argument is based. Drawing on ethnographic interviews of the subject in question, Lien reconstructs this fascinating period and gleans a

<sup>15</sup> Magali Barbieri, *Health and Mortality in Early 20th Century Vietnam: A Demographer's Perspective*, Brown Bag Lecture (Berkeley: Center for Southeast Asia Studies, UC Berkeley, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Sokhieng Au, "Medicine and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia," Doctoral Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Tran Thi Liên, "Henriette Bui: The Narrative of Vietnam's First Woman Doctor," *Vietnam Exposé: French Scholarship on Twentieth-Century Vietnamese Society*, eds. Gisele Bousquet and Pierre Brocheux (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> Monnais-Rousselot, "In the Shadow of the Colonial Hospital: Developing Health Care in Indochina, 1860-1939."

<sup>19</sup> Laurence Monnais and Noémi Tousignant, "The Colonial Life of Pharmaceuticals: Accessibility to Healthcare, Consumption of Medicines, and Medical Pluralism in French Vietnam, 1905-1945," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1.1-2 (2006).

<sup>20</sup> Laurence Monnais-Rousselot, "Paradoxes D'une Médicalisation Coloniale: La Professionnalisation Du <<Médecin Indochinois>> Au Xxe Siècle " *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 143 (2002).

slightly different narrative than that of the official discourse. Significantly, Lien raises at least one salient point that is relevant to this chapter's argument. Namely, French doctors in the colonies, steeped in their own knowledge and often blatant racism, were often ignorant of local conditions. Lien explains, "The French doctors were cut off from Vietnamese society by the colonial reality. Confident in their western knowledge, these doctors were often ignorant of local traditions. Their own realities were far from the ones of the Indochinese doctors and employees (p.305)."<sup>21</sup> One dramatic example of this problem is the difference in obstetric and gynecological traditions and practices between Vietnamese midwives and French doctors. Whereas the former saw themselves as using scissors in ways that drew upon traditional Chinese medical practices, French doctors misperceived both the instrument and the practice as backward and uncivilized. Lien writes:

In her doctoral thesis, Laurence Monnais-Rousselot uses the reports of French colonial doctors who describe the terrible sanitary conditions in which Vietnamese women gave birth before the implementation of a French colonial healthcare system. According to Dr. Henriette Bui, the description was excessively biased because in the past Vietnamese midwives generally used scissors from traditional Chinese medicine and not, as the reports described, a simple fragment of broken bottle or anything sharp...picked up on the ground (p.294).

Cultural misapprehensions such as these seem likely and all the more probable in light of growing evidence from other scholars. Magli Barbieri, a demographer at UC Berkeley, has questioned the claim of the French regime's "beneficial influence" on the mortality rates in colonial Vietnam. Barbieri writes, "[A]n in-depth analysis of medical records, published mortality statistics and causes of death does not support the conventional idea of a major mortality drop, such as that observed in other colonized countries of Asia (the Philippines, Indonesia, and India)." Barbieri continues, "Indeed, reports by the colonial health services found in the archives suggest that the quality and quantity of the means available to the medical community were extremely modest and the general socio-economic context was far from favorable to the well-being of the general population."<sup>22</sup> In her interview of Dr. Henriette Bui, Tran Thi Lien also notes that western medicine was often too expensive for the vast majority of the local population who consequently relied on what was more affordable: traditional medicine (p.296-7).<sup>23</sup>

Other studies on the influence of French medicine on Indochina suggest a similarly lukewarm conclusion. In her dissertation *Medicine and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia*, Sokhieng Au maintains that both French and indigenous medical traditions grew in parallel with each other rather than merging in a syncretic manner.<sup>24</sup> Although her study focuses primarily on what is present-day Cambodia, her detailed historical analysis of French colonial medical practices in Indochina is nevertheless relevant to our argument. In particular, her chapters on the failure of the French social hygiene movements (chapter 4) and failed indoctrination of Indochinese midwives (chapter 5) deserve further elaboration because they further support the claim of the uneven influence of French medicine on the colony. Regarding the failed social hygiene movements, Sokhieng observes that while western hygienic practices did make some headway in colonial Cambodia, they did not completely efface enduring indigenous beliefs. By

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<sup>21</sup> Liên, "Henriette Bui: The Narrative of Vietnam's First Woman Doctor."

<sup>22</sup> Barbieri, *Health and Mortality in Early 20th Century Vietnam: A Demographer's Perspective*.

<sup>23</sup> Liên, "Henriette Bui: The Narrative of Vietnam's First Woman Doctor."

<sup>24</sup> Au, "Medicine and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia."

the end of the 1930s, according to Sokhieng, “the country would witness an actual rise in reports of sorcery (both medical and otherwise), an indication that the indigenous population was not adopting the rational medical beliefs the medical administration was attempting to disseminate...” (p.154). Indeed, French doctors were perpetually bewildered by the locals’ ability to hold, simultaneously, two contradictory beliefs. Sokhieng continues to explain, “The ability to be all-inclusive of seemingly contradictory information would time and again baffle French administrators...Khmer adoption of (parts) of French models of disease causation without abandoning their own was to the French a mark of bad faith, illogic, or insincerity” (p.155).<sup>25</sup> Further evidence of French medicine’s failure to indoctrinate the locals is dramatized by the effort to recruit local women, both Khmer and Vietnamese, as midwives and caretakers. Although in the twentieth-century the transformation of pregnancy and motherhood into a medical matter was rapid, according to Sokhieng, this same transformation failed to occur during the colonial period and continues to fail today. “Childbirth is still a ritual event,” Sokhieng explains, “centered in the home.” Sokhieng concludes: “This lack of transformation may be a failure in the expansion of western medicine...” (p.205). A similar conclusion has been advanced in a recent doctoral dissertation by Thuy Linh Nguyen in the case of Vietnamese midwives.<sup>26</sup>

Recent scholarship, therefore, casts doubt on the pervasive power and influence of western medicine in Indochina. Whereas some scholars point to the cultural misapprehension between traditional and modern medicine taking place between people, showing how the locals were selective in their adoption of French practices, others suggest that certain practices failed to register at all with the locals. Regardless of the form that it took, western medicine nevertheless left a far more uneven imprint than has been supposed. To the extent that western medicine is a necessary condition of the sexual regime that Foucault identified, then, we can reasonably question the existence of an analogue regime in the colony, and by extension, an analogue form of modern power that provided “truth” and meaning to one’s sex and sexuality.

#### *The Lukewarm Reception of Psychoanalysis*

But even if one were to dispute the prior argument on western medicine’s feeble influence on the colony, the question remains whether the discourse of psychoanalysis was influential in Vietnam in this period. Of the nineteenth-century psychoanalytic thinkers—Richard von-Krafft-Ebing, who published *Psychopathia Sexualis*; Havelock Ellis who produced *Sexual Inversion*; Wilhelm Fleiss who formulated the idea of bisexuality—Freud remains a particularly apt subject on which to focus a discussion of sexuality in this period. For, regardless

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<sup>25</sup> It should be noted that the law of non-contradiction, whereby two logically antithetical statements cannot coexist, belongs to one strand of western rationality and that the Hegelian tradition could represent an alternative that defies and exceeds this law. On the objections of teaching Hegel in mainstream philosophy, Judith Butler explains: “Hegel is, in many departments throughout this country, not taught as part of any listed course, and in some instances, he is explicitly excluded from the history of philosophy sequence. The resistances to Hegel are, of course, notorious: his language is ostensibly impenetrable, he rejects the law of non-contradiction, his speculations are unfounded, and, in principle, unverifiable” (p.65). See Judith Butler, “Can the ‘Other’ of Philosophy Speak?,” *Schools of Thought: Twenty Five Years of Interpretive Social Science*, eds. Joan Scott and Debra Keates (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>26</sup> Focusing on the medicalization of childbirth in colonial Vietnam (1880-1944), Thuy Linh Nguyen demonstrates the emergence of a “new regime of childbirth,” but one which was influenced by social and political dynamics in both the local and European communities. In particular, Vietnamese midwives in the urban centers showed a “**mixed form**” of maternity services that “adhered to the French rules of hygiene but still allowed certain Vietnamese religious rituals” (p.1); in rural areas, practices and beliefs prior to the French occupation continued to prevail. See Thuy Linh Nguyen, “The Medicalization of Childbirth in Colonial Vietnam, 1880-1944,” University of Pennsylvania, 2009.

of the extent of western medicine's influence on the local culture, the modern concept of sexuality begins and often ends with him.<sup>27</sup> Of course, scholars have debated whether Freud significantly departed from his nineteenth-century counterparts but, ultimately, it is he who, according to Arnold Davidson, "ascended to the level of concepts," turning bits and pieces of inchoate psychoanalytic ideas into an articulate system (p.90).<sup>28</sup> Here I use "Freud" to mean less the name of an historical persona than as a metonym for a constellation of nineteenth-century psychiatric concepts about homosexuality, including but not limited to the idea of sexual "perversion," the mechanism of the incest taboo, the dyad between homo- and heterosexuality and the yoking of the former with inversion. Indeed, had psychoanalysis gained a powerful grip on the Vietnamese, one would expect that these ideas would have exhibited a demonstrable influence. One would not need to show, of course, that psychoanalysis—in its heterogeneity—penetrated all strata of the colony, but only that it made significant headway in certain key discursive sites, namely in elite cultural texts and institutions. Yet, a closer examination of historical documents suggests that that these psychiatric concepts were only selectively translated and, in some cases, as we shall see, localized and adapted for other cultural ends, such as the free-love movement.

Perhaps the strongest piece of evidence showing Freud's imprint is a sexual health manual entitled *Hương Lửa*<sup>29</sup>—literally translated as "Fired Scent" and understood to mean "Conjugal Love." Of the several sex manuals I examined including *Protecting the Family*,<sup>30</sup> *Male Female Health: On the Illnesses Afflicting Youth*,<sup>31</sup> *Reflections of a Young Medical Doctor*,<sup>32</sup> *The Two Reproductive Systems*,<sup>33</sup> only *Conjugal Love* revealed a systematic explication of Freud's theory of sexual development. Another document invokes Freud and Havelock Ellis for their theory of dreams,<sup>34</sup> but makes no mention of their theories of sexuality. By contrast, this manual explicitly outlines the sexual concepts we have long associated with psychoanalysis. Published in 1936, when professional medical associations were finally founded in all three of the country's major regions,<sup>35</sup> this manual was advertised in and welcomed by other major journals.<sup>36</sup> For our purposes here, it serves to foreground some of the psychoanalytic

<sup>27</sup> As the father of psychoanalysis, Freud remains the ultimate arbiter of the travels and travails of this school of thought. As Davidson has written, "[N]o matter what one takes as the last word of psychoanalysis, its first and second words are always the words of Freud" (p.69).<sup>27</sup> See Arnold I. Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>28</sup> See Chapter 3, "How to Do the History of Psychoanalysis: A Reading of Freud's 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality.'" Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts*.

<sup>29</sup> Lê Hữu Mỹ, *Hương Lửa (Fired Scent, or Conjugal Love)* (Hanoi: Lạc Hồng Thư Xá, 1936).

<sup>30</sup> Lê Huy Phách, *Bảo Vệ Gia Đình (Protecting the Family)* (Hanoi: Thủ Ký, 1940).

<sup>31</sup> Lê Huy Phách, *Nam Nữ Bảo Toàn: Nói Về Những Bệnh Của Nam Nữ Thanh Niên (Male Female Health: On the Illnesses Afflicting Youth)* (Hanoi: Lê Cường, 1936).

<sup>32</sup> Trương Văn Quế, *Những Điều Suy Tưởng Của Một Y Sĩ Thiếu Niên (Réflexions D'un Jeune Médecin)* (Saigon: Polyclinique Municipal Saigon, 1934).

<sup>33</sup> Quế, *Những Điều Suy Tưởng Của Một Y Sĩ Thiếu Niên (Réflexions D'un Jeune Médecin)*.

<sup>34</sup> See Mộng Ông, "Tâm Linh Giao Thông Trong Giấc Mộng, Phần 3 (the Spirit Communicates in Dreams, Part3)," *Tiếng Dân (The People's Voice)* 1459 (1940), Mộng Ông, "Tâm Linh Giao Thông Trong Giấc Mộng, Phần 2 (the Spirit Communicates in Dreams, Part 2)," *Tiếng Dân (The People's Voice)* 1459 (1940), Mộng Ông, "Tâm Linh Giao Thông Trong Giấc Mộng, Phần 1 (the Spirit Communicates in Dreams, Part 1)," *Tiếng Dân (The People's Voice)* 1458 (1940).

<sup>35</sup> [NoAuthor], "Y Học Hội Ở Vinh Được Phép Thành Lập (Medical Association at Vinh Is Founded)," *Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal]* 137 (1936).

<sup>36</sup> [NoAuthor], "Giới Thiệu Sách: Hương Lửa (Book Review of Fired Scent)," *Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal]* 142 (1936).

concepts in our discussion that circulated in the historical period. Notably, after outlining the different developmental stages on the way towards heterosexuality and explaining the ideas of the libido, unconscious, and incest taboo, the manual turns to the problem of nervous disorders. It states:

The artifacts of the ego are fragile, especially with respect to the unconscious dimension and to the Sexual Instinct, and for the most part it is rarely complete. Hence many a times it cannot withhold the Sexual Instinct, with the one attempting to escape consciousness, the other trying to enter the unconscious, (*refoulement de l'Instinct sexuel*), this conflict often being the reasons for nervous disorders. Often the Sexual Instinct is too repressed that it undergoes transformation (*camouflage*) in order to escape consciousness, which leads to nervous disorders (*néuropathie*). These disorders are only camouflages of the repressed Sexual Instinct that are difficult to detect. For this reason, professor Freud has resolved the problem by examining people's slips of tongue (*lapses*) and gestures (*actes manqués*).

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Những cái nhân tạo của linh-hồn ấy rất mong manh, nhất là đối với phần vô thức và Dục-tình, và phần nhiều không được hoàn bị. Vì thế nên nhiều khi không giữ nổi Dục-tình, một bệnh đòi ra hữu-thức, một bệnh ẩn vào vô-thức, (*refoulement de l'Instinct sexuel*), sự tranh ngạnh ấy là căn-nguyên của các bệnh tinh-thần. Nhiều khi, Dục-tình bị kiềm chế ngặt quá, phải thay hình đổi dạng (*camouflage*) mới ra ngoài hữu-thức được, mà gây thành bệnh thần kinh (*néuropathie*). Những chứng bệnh thần kinh này chỉ là những hình dạng thay đổi khó nhận được của Dục-tình bị kiềm chế mà thôi. Lấy lẽ ấy, giáo sư Freud giải-nghĩa mọi việc nhầm-nhờ của người ta trong khi nói năng (*lapses*) và cử chi (*actes manqués*).

To appreciate fully the significance of this passage, we must first understand something of the achievement of nineteenth-century European psychiatry. One of its great innovations was to link the exterior world of anatomy and physiology with the uncharted world of interiority. Before the 1880s, according to Robert Nye, the anatomical taxonomies of sexual type dominated French medical discourse; the markers of sexual identity were comprised of the “‘typicality’ of the genitals, secondary sexual characters... and functional potency with a normally constituted member of the ‘opposite’ sex” (p.175).<sup>37</sup> Within this framework, male homosexuals were classified somewhere on the lower end of the spectrum of gender identity along with their neighbors, the hermaphrodites and “masculine” women, subjects whose feminine and masculine features were blurred or indistinguishable. With the rise of this psychiatric style of reasoning, anatomy and physiology gave way to psychology. The homosexual’s constitution became both the cause and effect of a psychiatric disorder known as “inversion.” Describing the first French text that developed this idea, Nye explains that inversion was a form of a “weakening... of the affective faculties which produced a ‘strange order of ideas’ giving rise to a genital appetite for the same sex.” This weakening could be hereditary or provoked by masturbation or “vicious excess” leading to “obsessive” ideas (p.177).<sup>38</sup> To the medical establishment, the male “invert” was “sterile, repellently effeminate, unstable, and afflicted with a congenital disorder whereby their abnormal sexuality is hypostatized into a ‘mode of selfhood’ and a ‘category of identity’”

<sup>37</sup> Robert A. Nye, "Sex Difference and Male Homosexuality in French Medical Discourse, 1830-1930," *Homosexuality and Medicine, Health, and Science*, eds. Wayne R. Dynes and Stephen Donaldson, vol. IX (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

(p.185).<sup>39</sup> Like sadism, masochism, fetishism and other kinds of so-called sexual aberrations, “inversion” represented one mental case of a broader problem, what nineteenth-century psychoanalysts called “perversions,” the psychic deviations of the “sexual instinct” from heterocoital propagation. In light of this context, we can now return to the Vietnamese passage to determine how and the extent to which these European psychiatric innovations were culturally translated.

Like its nineteenth-century counterpart, the Vietnamese text *Hương Lửa*<sup>40</sup> (“Fired Scent” or “Conjugal Love”) does draw the connection between the corporeal and psychic worlds. “Nervous disorders” are manifested through slips of tongue and bodily gestures. As Freud pointed out, one’s sexuality was not limited to one’s genitals but expanded to encompass the entirety of the human body, so that a girl’s sucking of the thumb, for instance, now signified infantile sexuality and a psychological pleasure in onanism.<sup>41</sup> Yet, interestingly, the prior Vietnamese passage makes no mention of any sexual aberrations. It is astonishing that even though this text is perhaps singular in its commitment to a systematic explication of Freud’s theory, nowhere does it elaborate on the string of enumerated sexual “perversions.” A discerning Vietnamese reader could perhaps make inferences about the problem of “homosexuality” based on the manual’s characterization of normal sexual development. But, quite apart from a general discussion of “nervous disorders,” and in subsequent pages, gonorrhoea, syphilis and other venereal and reproductive diseases, this manual addresses neither “perversions” nor “inversions” that so preoccupied nineteenth-century psychoanalysts in Europe. Of course, nervous disorders are conceptually linked to the latter problem, but the manual neither makes nor attempts to make any such link.

Examination of other key cultural texts of the period yields a similar conclusion. We observe, for example, traces of Freud in Nguyen Cong Hoan’s novel *Golden Branches, Leaves of Jade* [Lá Ngọc, Cánh Vàng] (1934). The heroine, Nga, falls in love with another young man, Chi. But when her upper-class family refuses to recognize the relationship, she falls ill and goes mad. The family summons a western doctor. After examining the young women’s symptoms, the doctor states:

Curing the mad and caring for the mad are very difficult tasks. It is necessary to be steadfast. This is a **mental illness**...your daughter has a heart problem that was exacerbated by a **disappointment in love**. Unfortunately, the weather is sweltering making it easier for mental illnesses to develop quite rapidly. Nothing is so good in treating an illness as humoring the patient. So you and your wife should give in to her wishes... That is, you should make her feel content. You should let her lover come see her. (p.110-111; my emphases).

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Chữa người điên và coi người điên, là việc rất khó. Cần phải người kiên tâm. Nó là **bệnh về tâm lý**...con ông nguyên đau tim lại uất lên, vì thất vọng về tình. Chẳng may khi trời oi ả, càng làm dễ cho bệnh điên phát ra, mà phát ra một cách kịch liệt. Chữa bệnh không gì bằng chiều người có bệnh, vậy ông bà nên chiều ý muôn của cô ấy...Nghĩa là ông bà nên làm cho cô ấy vừa lòng. Ông bà nên cho phép người yêu cô ấy đến thăm cô ấy...

Clearly, Nga’s mental illness and prognosis by a western medical doctor are an allusion to if not a direct influence of psychoanalysis. Situating these novels in their broader cultural milieu, Neil

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Mỹ, *Hương Lửa* (Fired Scent, or Conjugal Love).

<sup>41</sup> Page 47, Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts*.

Jamieson states, “Both Freudian notions of libido and Marxist concepts of culture and society can be detected in nascent form.” He continues, “But in the early to mid-1930s the focus of the new novels was on concrete social issues, not formal ideology” (p.125-6).<sup>42</sup> I would further add that, besides a mild flirtation with Freud, something else is going on in this passage. It is significant that the cure to Nga’s mental illness is to permit her to love and to love freely, allowing her to see her lover in spite of her parent’s disapproval. Freud’s ideas about the libido and repression thus has been translated and redeployed in the service of an entirely different social cause: the free-love movement. Students of Vietnamese literary history would know that Nguyen Cong-Hoan was opposed to some of the radical proposals of this movement. Some of his novels were, in fact, “counter-novels” written in opposition to the sexual freedom allowed to young women of the time.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, his novels including the one in question are engaged in a shared cultural discourse, one of which was the use of Freud in support of this movement. Looking at other cultural texts of the period, David Marr notes that the two writers Cuu Kim Son and Van Hue invoked Freud in support of their idea of a “sexual crisis,” believing that the “stifling of sexual instincts to be one cause of masturbation (at that time in the West still thought to be destructive to the nervous system), prostitution, venereal disease, rape and the taking of religious vows of chastity.”<sup>44</sup> Although this idea of free-love will prove to have implications for thinking about homosexuality in the period, here we can already see that in the Vietnamese context Freud’s ideas were received only selectively and in diluted form—without much emphasis on sexual aberrations or perversions. The only “perversion,” it seems, was the restrictions imposed by traditional parents on their children from loving and loving freely.

As another example, Freud’s theories were also debated by writers in *The New Women’s News*. In a three-part series, the journal introduced and explained to readers Freud’s ideas of the libido, conscious/unconscious and the Oedipus Complex. No mention is made of homosexuality. In the conclusion, this anonymous author then dismisses psychoanalysis because he or she believes it disregards dialectical history. The author writes:

[A]fter receiving [Freud’s] ‘new’ ideas, some unthinking people may now believe it’s revolutionary, but those of a scientific disposition...would conclude that it’s a **theory to deceive the masses**...[A]t the moment when people finally understand history, Freud propagates his idea of the libido, making it the center of intellectual preoccupation, establishing for society at large a strange dynamic, that is, sexual desire, and so produces a dangerous ideology of truth, of societal truth... (p.8; my emphasis).<sup>45</sup>

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[N]ghe những lời quả quyết ‘mới’ của ông ta, có kẻ không hay suy nghĩ thì cho là cách mạng; nhưng người có óc khoa học...xét về kết quả tất nhận là thuyết để đánh lừa phần đông học giả đời này...[Đ]ương lúc họ bắt đầu hiểu lịch sử rõ ràng, Freud truyền-bá câu chuyện libido, lấy nó làm trung-tâm điểm cho sự lo nghĩ của học thức giới, đặt cho đời người một cái phạm vi hoạt động quái gở, tức là sự nhục dục, thế là gây ra một luồng tư tưởng nguy hiểm cho cái chân lý, cái chân lý xã hội...

Of course, psychoanalysis itself is, arguably, positing a certain interpretation of temporality, and hence of history, one that is different from the straight and linear trajectory of time. Further,

<sup>42</sup> Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, Ch 3.

<sup>44</sup> See footnote 157, p. 239. David Marr, "The Question of Women," *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial* (Berkeley: University of California, 1981).

<sup>45</sup> XX, "Triết Học Và Đời Người, Phần 2 (Philosophy and Life, Part 2)."

psychoanalysis provides a sophisticated vocabulary to explain the workings of fantasy, all of which can be utilized towards politically and intellectually provocative ways, even though it is frequently not.<sup>46</sup> But for any number of reasons, Freud and his ideas failed to resonate with this Vietnamese writer and, it seems, for many other Vietnamese intellectuals. Hence, it is not surprising that David Marr notes that, “As it turned out, Freud ended up being more often denounced than endorsed by Vietnamese Marxist writers” (p.240).<sup>47</sup>

Freud’s work, however, did have some superficial effects in some of the cultural discourse and debates of the time. Perhaps one effect was to render a wide range of practices suspect. In the *Science Journal*, for example, it was reported that French doctors were on the verge of finding a cure for the “disease of jealousy.”<sup>48</sup> In the advice columns of the same journal, reader after reader sought help for their problem with nocturnal emissions; indeed, I found over a dozen such articles.<sup>49</sup> Conceived as a curable illness, doctors would continually prescribe a remedy, while acknowledging the difficulty of curing something that involves controlling one’s “consciousness.”<sup>50</sup> Likewise, the historian Shawn McHale notes that by 1933 French sex pamphlets were readily available in bookstores. He writes:

While French censors carefully inspected articles on politics, they allowed writings on sexuality. By 1933, a reader could walk into the Tin Đức Thư Xã, one of Saigon's more important publishers and bookstores, and pick up a wide range of French-language sex tracts. Interested in homosexuality? The reader could buy Pédérastie et homosexualité for 60 sous. Perversions? He could buy Les perversions sexuelles for 1.45 piastres. Other books discussed male impotence, lesbianism, women and sex, and how to make love. Vietnamese-language discussions on sex were rarer, but they existed as well. Usually in the form of 'hygiene' manuals, these books discussed venereal diseases, sexual intercourse, the differences between male and female pleasure, and (occasionally) the dangers of masturbation (65).<sup>51</sup>

<sup>46</sup>Butler writes, “Psychoanalysis does not need to be associated exclusively with the reactionary moment in which culture is understood to be based on an irrefutable heterosexuality. Indeed, there are so many questions that psychoanalysis might pursue in order to help understand the psychic life of those who live outside of normative kinship or in some mix of the normative and ‘non-’” (p.128). See Butler, Undoing Gender.

<sup>47</sup> Marr, Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1925-1945.

<sup>48</sup> [NoAuthor], “Thuốc Chữa Chứng ghen (Medication for Jealousy Symptoms),” Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal] 76 (1934).

<sup>49</sup> [NoAuthor], “Cầu Thuốc Bệnh Di-Tinh [Request for a Prescription to the Wet Dreams Problem],” Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal] 24 (1932), Phan Minh Châu, “Di Tinh (Spermatorrhoea),” Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal] 31 (1932), Vĩ Hà, “Bệnh Mộng Tinh (the Disease of Wet Dreams),” Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal] 35 (1932), Hoàng Mạnh Ngọc, “Bệnh Di-Tinh (the Illness of Spermatorrhoea [Wet Dreams]),” Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal] 28 (1932), Hòa Phong, “Mộng Tinh (Wet Dreams),” Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal] 34 (1932), Trần Tiên, “Bệnh Mộng Tinh (the Wet Dreams Disease),” Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal] 36 (1932), KT, “Bệnh Di Tinh, Mộng Tinh (the Illness of Nocturnal Emmissions, Wet Dreams),” Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal] 41 (1933), [NoAuthor], “Bệnh Di Tinh (the Illness of Nocturnal Emissions),” Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal] 89 (1935), [NoAuthor], “Bệnh Di Tinh (the Wet Dreams Disease),” Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal] 89 (1935), [NoAuthor], “Bệnh Mộng Di Tinh (the Wet Dreams Disease),” Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal] 121 (1936), [NoAuthor], “Mộng Di Tinh (Wet Dreams),” Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal] 144 (1936), [NoAuthor], “Mách Thuốc (Medical Prescriptions),” Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal] 169 (1937), [NoAuthor], “Hỏi Thuốc (Prescription Advice),” Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal] 152 (1937), [NoAuthor], “Mách Thuốc (Prescription),” Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal] 169 (1937), [NoAuthor], “Bệnh Mộng Tinh (Wet Dreams Disease),” Khoa Học Tạp Chí [Science Journal] 169 (1937).

<sup>50</sup> [NoAuthor], “Mộng Di Tinh (Wet Dreams).”

<sup>51</sup> McHale, Shawn. “Printing, Power, and the Transformation of Vietnamese Culture, 1920-1945.” Doctoral Dissertation. Cornell University, 1995.

These foreign publications about sexual perversions were probably inaccessible to the majority and read by only an elite group--most likely students who had returned from their education in the metropole or bilingual clerks, interpreters, translators, journalists and writers. Such was also the case with Nguyen Thi Kiem who published a summary of the lessons she learned by reading the French journal *Temoignages de notre temps* (1933-1934) which, in turn, addressed the “disease” of homosexuality.<sup>52</sup> She writes:

Prostitution has yet a second source, that is the disease of a group of men and women who lack the reproductive function or who have unnaturally developed dispositions in discord with the laws of biology. According to the laws of biology, this group is abnormal (**inadaptabilité constitutionnelle dégénérative**). Prostitution in regards to this cohort is no longer prostitution but a disease of biology, disease of the **nervous system (amour vicieux; homosexualité, sadisme)**. Because of their abnormal biological needs, they cannot get married and form a family. Only female prostitutes or those sick like themselves cannot satisfy their desires. For this reason, prostitution keeps increasing. These are sick people in society. Society must care for them and quarantine them. Science has a means of curing them. In a fully planned society this problem can be easily resolved because this group comprise but a minority (p.14; French in original; my emphases).

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Sự mãi dâm còn một nguyên nhân thứ hai nữa là do nói tật bệnh của một hạng nam nữ mà cơ quan sinh dục hay là tánh tình không nảy nở đúng theo lẽ tự nhiên, của luật sinh-lý. Hạng này, theo sinh lý học, là khác thường (inadaptabilité constitutionnelle dégénérative). Sự mãi-dâm đối với hạng này chẳng phải là mãi-dâm nữa mà là các bệnh về sinh-lý, các bệnh về thần kinh (amour vicieux; homosexualité, sadisme). Các hạng này vì sự cần về sanh lý khác với người thường nên chẳng có vợ có chồng như kẻ khác với người thường nên chẳng có vợ có chồng như kẻ khác mà chỉ có bọn kỳ nữ hay là bọn đồng bệnh mới có thể làm thỏa mãn họ được; vì vậy mà sự mãi-dâm càng tăng thêm... Các người này là người có bệnh trong xã hội. Xã hội phải săn sóc họ và để họ ở riêng. Khoa học đã có cứu chữa được họ. Một xã hội tổ chức hoàn toàn thì vấn đề này dễ giải quyết vì hạng này chỉ là một thiểu số (p.14; Vietnamese spelling and French in original).

This is the kind of evidence that would strengthen Nguyen Quoc Vinh’s thesis on the “deviancy” of homosexual desires.<sup>53</sup> The passage conforms to the nineteenth-century (and contemporary) understanding of homosexuality whereby non-procreative acts are indiscriminately grouped together and relegated to the category of the “abnormal.” The passage also reflects the prevailing French medical discourse that links the homosexual’s degenerative corporeality with his obsessive psyche. But note that the original *source* of this translated document is from a French journal. Nguyen Thi Kiem was, in a sense, the vector that imported haphazardly these ideas into the Vietnamese, even though the vocabulary of pathology remains in French: “inadaptabilité constitutionnelle dégénérative;” “amour vicieux;” “homosexualité;” “sadism.” By contrast, the Vietnamese rendering of Freud’s theories, as we observed earlier, lacked any mention of such concepts.

<sup>52</sup> Kiem, Nguyễn Thị. "Vấn Đề Mãi-Dâm Trên Thế Giới [The Problem of the Prostitution in the World]." *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 246 (1934): 13-14.

<sup>53</sup> Vinh, "Deviant Bodies and Dynamics of Displacement of Homoerotic Desire in Vietnamese Literature from and About the French Colonial Period (1858-1954)."

Psychoanalytic ideas were also glibly circulated in some literary debates. According to Peter Zinoman, the prolific writer Vu Trong Phung was fascinated with Freudian concepts.<sup>54</sup> In 1936, in one of his pen-wars on the nature of realist fiction, Vu Trong Phung invoked the name of Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld, the German sexologist who circled the globe to document the world's sexual cultures. Phung compared Mr. Thai Phi, the editor of *Tin Van* (Literature News), to one of the so-called "abnormal" people described in Hirschfeld's book.<sup>55</sup> Mr. Thai Phi had written an article opposing Phung's realist depictions of sex because they were off-putting to readers. In response, Phung writes, "If this is the way you speak, then you are probably sick and struck with a dreadful case of haunting (*hantise*) which is very dangerous for the standards of good custom; you are one of those who are not normal (*anormal*) worthy of Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld's analysis in his book where he looked at the sexual practices of the abnormal" (French in original).<sup>56</sup> In the following year, Vu Trong Phung once again cautioned his bourgeois contemporaries whom he believed were too quick to admire French literary culture. "Do you realize," Phung asked rhetorically, "that the renowned A.Gide, Rostand, Verlaine are the leaders in France of the dangerous practice of sodomy (*pédéraste*) [*nan ke giao*], a practice that thousands of people in Germany also engage in?" (my translation; French in original).<sup>57</sup> It is unclear whether Phung's fascination with a certain interpretation of psychoanalysis may have played some role in his views about proper sexuality. It is clear, however, that Vu Trong Phung was remarkable in demonstrating his knowledge of psychoanalytic concepts, whereas other Vietnamese writers failed to share the same enthusiasm. As Zinoman has suggested, Phung's satirical novel *Dumb Luck*, "mocks the Vietnamese elite's superficial understanding of the great Viennese modernist" (p.11).<sup>58</sup>

Indeed, Phung provides us with further evidence of the lukewarm reception of psychoanalysis in his proposal for the creation of a program for sexual education. In describing his attitude towards the New Woman, Vu Trong Phung explained that whereas his counterparts imagined only an idealized image, Phung claimed he saw one who was "amoral, uneducated, impious and purposeless" ("vô học... hư hỏng lại bất hiếu bất mục nữa").<sup>59</sup> The argument that the New Woman lacks sexual mores is the same diagnosis Phung offered in the introduction to another of his novels, *To Be a Prostitute*. In that piece, Phung expressed concern that Vietnamese society was falling into a state of sexual disarray wherein acts of incest were running

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<sup>54</sup> Zinoman, ed., *Dumb Luck*

<sup>55</sup> Vu Trong Phung, "Thư Ngỏ Cho Ông Thái Phi, Chủ Báo Tin Văn Về Bài Văn Chương Dâm Uế (Letter to Mr. Thai Phi, the Editor of Literature News About the Article 'Pornographic Literature')," *Tranh Luận Văn Nghệ Thế Kỷ Xx (Literary and Artistic Debates in the Twentieth Century)*, ed. Nguyễn Ngọc Thiện, vol. 2 (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Lao Động (Labor Publishing House), 2002 [1936]).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. The original quotation: "Cứ như ông nói thì ông đang có bệnh, ông đang bị một sức ám ảnh (*hantise*) ghê gớm rất nguy hiểm cho thuần phong mỹ tục, ông đang là một kẻ bất thường (*anormal*) đáng để cho bác sỹ Magmes Hirschfeld khảo cứu trong cuốn sách của ông ta, khảo về sự dâm uế của những người bất thường" (Archaic spelling and French in original).

<sup>57</sup> Vu Trong Phung, "Đề Đáp Lời Báo Ngày Nay Dâm Hay Là Không Dâm? (a Response to the Journal *These Days: Sex or No Sex?*)," *Tranh Luận Văn Nghệ Thế Kỷ Xx (Literary and Artistic Debates in the Twentieth Century)*, ed. Nguyễn Ngọc Thiện, vol. 2 (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Lao Động (The Labor Publishing House), 2002 [1937]).

<sup>58</sup> Zinoman, ed., *Dumb Luck*

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

rampant.<sup>60</sup> So he proposed that Vietnamese society promote some form of sexual education. He writes:

What is more unreasonable than to accept that various modern activities including theatres, cinemas, modern dresses, dance halls, perfumes, cosmetics create the conditions for people to increase their sexual activity yet to refuse to accept simultaneously the need to promote **sexual education**?

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Còn gì vô lý cho bằng đã công nhận cuộc tân sinh hoạt trong đó có rạp hát, rạp chiếu bóng, những một y phục tân thời, nhà khiêu vũ, nước hoa, phấn sáp, là những điều kiện làm cho loài người càng ngày càng tăng mãi cái *dâm* lên, mà lại đồng thời không công nhận vấn đề **giáo dục cái sự dâm** là cần truyền bá (p.39; my emphasis).

This passage discloses perhaps Phung's pedagogical motivation in producing some of his social realist novels. At the same time, it furnishes further evidence that psychoanalytic norms failed to produce and discipline subjects as much as they did in the European context. If Phung is correct in his description, this period was bustling with sexual activity and with little regard to psychic prohibitions, and hence precisely the grounds for the proposed "sexual education" ("giáo dục cái sự dâm"). The coordinates of psychiatric power that Foucault identified in Europe seem to lack their colonial correlatives.<sup>61</sup> Phung's vocabulary itself is revealing, because it is different from the one used in contemporary Vietnam and by the late Hanoi critic Hoang Thieu Son, whose contemporary introduction opens the re-publication of Phung's novel in 2005. Son employs the more recent term "giáo dục **giới tính**" ("sex education"),<sup>62</sup> whereas Phung invokes the term "giáo dục cái **sự dâm**" ("education on matters of sex"). It is difficult to discern the difference in translation, but the interpretive problem hinges precisely on the differing use of the word "sex" that I have bolded in the original: Son uses the term "giới tính; Phung, the term "dâm." With respect to the former, the word is translated to mean either sex or gender. "Giới" means border, limit or demarcation; "tính" implies one's character or disposition. According to a recent reference manual, together the term "**giới tính**" is defined as: "The characteristics of the **body and psychology** that...distinguish males and females"<sup>63</sup> (my emphasis). As for Phung's terminology, the meaning of "dâm" depends on its paired combination, but generally refers to the field of erotic pleasures. A 1931 Hanoi dictionary defines "dâm" as: "1. To be enraptured 2. Intoxicated in matters of beauty."<sup>64</sup> Unlike the contemporary term for sex ("giới tính"), neither of the sub-definitions for "dâm" index a psychology. Given his fears of widespread incest and sexual chaos in Vietnam, Phung may have envisioned a sex program that would eventually discipline people's pleasures and desires, as he was groping for something akin to our contemporary idea of gender dimorphism. Yet, he was unable to marshal the precise language to

<sup>60</sup> He writes: "In Vietnamese society incest is becoming widespread" ["Xã hội Việt Nam này, thật vậy đã bắt đầu loạn dâm"] (p.39). See Vu Trong Phung, *Làm Đĩ [to Be a Prostitute]* (Hanoi: Nha Xuất Ban Văn Học [Literature Publishing House], 2005 [1936]).

<sup>61</sup> Foucault, *Psychiatric Power, Lectures at the Collège De France*.

<sup>62</sup> See Hoàng Thiệu Sơn, "*Làm Đĩ: Cuốn Sách Có Trách Nhiệm Và Đầy Nhân Đạo (to Be a Prostitute: A Book with a Sense of Responsibility and Humanity)*," *Làm Đĩ [to Be a Prostitute]* (Hanoi: Nha Xuất Ban Văn Học (Literature Publishing House), 2005).: pg. 17.

<sup>63</sup> The original quotation: "Đặc điểm của cơ thể và của tâm lý làm cho hai phái nam và nữ hoặc giống đực và giống cái có chỗ khác biệt nhau" (p.874). See [NoAuthor], *Từ Điển Tiếng Việt [Vietnamese Dictionary]* (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa Thông Tin (Culture and Information Publishing House), 2005).

<sup>64</sup> The original quotation: "1.Say mê quá...2.Say mê về sắc-dục" (p.148). See [NoAuthor], *Việt-Nam Tự-Điển/ Hội Khai-Trí-Tiền-Đức Khởi Thảo [Vietnamese Dictionary]* (Hanoi Impr. Trung-Bac Tân-Van, 1931).

do so. In a 1937 letter, Phung translated the French word “éducation sexuelle” as “nam nữ **giao cấu** giáo dục”<sup>65</sup>—the “education of male female **copulation**,” thus emphasizing sexual activity, which is different from the contemporary meaning of sex presented above. In short, Phung lacked a vocabulary to describe the unity of sexual desire, identity and comportment—that conceptual constellation that belongs to the sexual regime established by European psychoanalytic institutions.

## II. The Historical Meanings of Gender and Sexuality

Indeed, an historical examination of the shifting meaning of the vocabulary of sex provides further evidence that casts doubt on the pervasive influence of European psychoanalysis in the late colonial period. Let us begin with the most contemporary term: “giới tính.” This is the standard entry supplied by both today’s general and medical dictionaries.<sup>66</sup> Yet, my research suggests that the term is, in fact, a neologism of the Communist North. The term appears neither in P.J. Pigneaux’s 1838 Annamite-Latin dictionary,<sup>67</sup> nor Truong Vinh Ky’s 1884 French-Annamite dictionary<sup>68</sup> nor in a 1931 Hanoi reference manual.<sup>69</sup> Nor is it present in Tran Trong Kim’s 1940 grammar book,<sup>70</sup> a 1951 French-Vietnamese medical dictionary,<sup>71</sup> nor in any of the dictionaries published in pre-1975 Saigon that I examined.<sup>72</sup> I was able to first locate it in a 1971 Spanish-Vietnamese dictionary published in Cuba, thus providing a clue to the term’s Communist origins.<sup>73</sup> It is not surprising, then, that the term surfaces in a 1977 Hanoi dictionary, one that was first published in 1969 and, according to its preface, was recognized by official organs of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (or North Vietnam).<sup>74</sup> In this latter dictionary, the definition of “gender/sex” (giới tính) is identical to its contemporary meaning: “characteristics of the **body and psyche** that distinguishes men and women, masculinity and femininity” (p.353).<sup>75</sup>

By contrast, Truong Vinh Ky’s 1884 French-Annamite dictionary translates “sexe” and “sexuelle,” respectively, as follows: “Loại, giống, thứ” [species, gender or type]; “Thuộc về loại, giống, thứ (đàn ông hay là đàn bà, đực cái, trống mái)” [belonging to a species, gender, type (man or woman, male, female) (p.1070). The word “giống”—gender or sex—denotes a

<sup>65</sup> As quoted and re-published in p.277. See Phung, Làm Đĩ [to Be a Prostitute].

<sup>66</sup> Phạm Ngọc Trí, Từ Điển Y Học Anh Việt [English Vietnamese Medical Dictionary] (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Y Học [Medical Publishing House], 2008).

<sup>67</sup> Pierre Joseph Pigneaux, Dictionarium Anamitico-Latinum, Primitus Inceptum Ab Illustrissimo Et Reverendissimo P. J. Pigneaux. Dein Absolutum Et Editum a J. L. Taberd., ed. A.J.L. Taberd (1838).

<sup>68</sup> P.J.B. Truong-Vinh-Ky, Petit Dictionnaire Français-Annamite (Saigon: Imp. de la Mission, à Tân-Định, 1884).

<sup>69</sup> [NoAuthor], Việt-Nam Tự-Điền/ Hội Khai-Trí-Tiến-Đức Khởi Thảo [Vietnamese Dictionary].

<sup>70</sup> Trần Trọng Kim, Việt Nam Văn Phạm [Vietnamese Grammar] (Hanoi: Lê Thăng Xuất Bản [Le Thang Publishing House], 1940).

<sup>71</sup> Phạm Khắc Quảng and Lê Khắc Thiềm, Vocabulaire Des Termes Techniques De Médecine (Paris: Nhà Xuất Bản Minh-Tân [Minh-Tan Publishing House], 1951).

<sup>72</sup> [NoAuthor], Từ Điển Việt Nam (Vietnamese Dictionary) (Saigon: Nhà Sách Khai-Trí, 1971), Nguyễn Văn Khôn, Việt Anh Từ Điển [Vietnamese English Dictionary] (Saigon: Nhà Sách Khai-Trí, 1966), Nguyễn Văn Khôn, Việt-Anh, Anh Việt: Từ Điển Thông Dụng [Usual Vietnamese-English, English-Vietnamese Dictionary] (Saigon: Nhà Sách Khai Trí [Khai Trí Publishing House], 1967), Nguyễn Văn Khôn, Anh Việt Tự Điền [English Vietnamese Dictionary] (Saigon: Nhà Sách Khai-Trí, 1975), Nguyễn Văn Khôn, Anh Việt Tự Điền [English Vietnamese Dictionary] (Glendale, CA: Dainam Publishing Co., 1986 [1975]).

<sup>73</sup> [NoAuthor], Diccionario Español Vietnamita [Spanish Vietnamese Dictionary] (La Habana, Cuba: Instituto Cubano del Libro, 1971).

<sup>74</sup> Văn Tân and Nguyễn Văn Đạm, Từ Điển Tiếng Việt [Vietnamese Dictionary] (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội [Social Sciences Publishing House], 1977).

<sup>75</sup> The original quotation: “Đặc điểm của cấu tạo cơ thể và tâm lý làm cho có chỗ khác nhau giữa nam và nữ, giữa giống đực và giống cái” (p.353). See Tân and Đạm, Từ Điển Tiếng Việt [Vietnamese Dictionary].

scientific classification of the animal world of which humans are a part. It is the one term that endures historically and that consistently appears in both northern and southern sources. It is the term that Tran Trong Kim uses to designate the idea of gender in his 1940 grammar book.<sup>76</sup> It is also a term that lacks any reference to psychology, as evidenced in the above 1884 entry and all subsequent entries. Yet, “giống” is less utilized in today’s public discourse in reference to human sex/gender, having been superseded by the term “giới tính.” “Giới tính,” however, is absent in almost all other pre-1986 reference manuals I examined, apart from the northern sources cited above. Therefore, the term is most likely a neologism of the Communist North. It is possible that the psychological meaning attached to this word—and hence to sex/gender—derived much later due to North Vietnam’s long-standing relations with the former Soviet Union<sup>77</sup> which, according to Simon Karlinsky, conceived of homosexuality as a mental illness beginning in the 1920s and throughout the Stalinist period.<sup>78</sup> This shift thus raises the question how the French colonial period may have understood gender and sexuality differently.

As a possible clue, the 1898 Annamite-French dictionary includes a definition of an unexpected term: “sắc.” When used alone, it generally refers to beauty or the world of appearances. The manual, however, combines it with another term “dục” [longing, desire] and displays the following entry: “**Sắc dục: Luxure, volupté; Nữ sắc: Fornication; Nam sắc: sodomie, pédérasie; Thủ sắc: masturbation; Mê sắc: Adoné au vice impur; Việt sắc: s’abstenir des voluptés charnelles**” (p.688; my emphasis).<sup>79</sup> In this entry, the term “sắc dục” is translated to mean “volupté”—delight, pleasure. The word “nam” which means “male” coupled with “sắc” leads to a translation for “sodomie, pédérasie”—male pleasure. Finally, the last entry is “s’abstenir des voluptés charnelles”—restraining oneself from carnal pleasures. In this context, the word “sắc” shares the same meaning as the word “dâm” that I analyzed earlier. Both these words point to an activity or relation but not quite the same as a sexual *identity* or a regime that links anatomy, physiology and psyche. Likewise, the meaning of “tính”—the second term in the contemporary word for gender (“giới tính”) or homosexuality (đồng tính)—shares a like meaning as that for “sắc”: the 1898 dictionary defines “tính” as “la luxure, luxurieux, débaché”

<sup>76</sup> He writes, “To speak about the feminine or masculine gender of humans, one can use the following terms: man, woman, boy, girl. Place them after the noun. For example: human man, human woman, a youth boy, a youth girl, group male, group female, elder man, elder woman” (p.38-39; literal translation). [“Nói về giống đực giống cái của loài người: Những tiếng dùng để trở giống đực giống cái của loài người, thì có những tiếng: đàn ông, đàn bà, trai, gái, nam, nữ. Những tiếng ấy đặt sau tiếng danh-tự: người đàn ông, người đàn bà, con trai, con gái, phái nam, phái nữ, cụ ông, cụ bà, bác trai, bác gái”]. See Kim, Việt Nam Văn Phạm [Vietnamese Grammar].

<sup>77</sup> After the 1954 Geneva Accord’s division of Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel, the government of the Communist North, which retains power to this day, maintained political, economic and educational ties with the former Soviet Union. In fact, over the course of three decades, the Soviets helped establish at least fourteen tertiary educational institutions in Hanoi and trained more than 70,000 Vietnamese specialists. In early 1985, according to David Marr, almost 5,000 Vietnamese students sojourned to the former Soviet Union to study at 150 of its different universities and colleges. See David Marr, “Tertiary Education, Research, and the Information Sciences in Vietnam,” Postwar Vietnam: Dilemmas in Socialist Development, eds. David Marr and Christine P. White (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1988).

<sup>78</sup> Simon Karlinsky, “Russia’s Gay Literature and Culture: The Impact of the October Revolution,” Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past, eds. Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus and Jr. George Chauncey (New York: New American Library, 1989).: p.358-362.

<sup>79</sup> J.F.M Génibrel, Dictionnaire Annamite-Française : Comprenant, 1° Tous Les Caractères De La Langue Annamite Vulgaire, Avec L’indication De Leurs Divers Sens Propres Ou Figurés, Et Justifiés Par De Nombreux Exemples, 2° Les Caractères Chinois Nécessaires À L’étude Des Tứ Thư, Ou Quatre Livres Classiques Chinois, 3° La Flore Et La Faune De L’indo-Chine. (Saigon: Impr. de la mission à Tân Định, 1898).

or “la nature de chair, la concupiscence” (p.762).<sup>80</sup> All of these terms represent, then, a constellation of meanings associated with the idea of *erotic pleasure* as opposed to a principle of identity. Thus, the lack of a conceptual vocabulary to describe “sexuality” in its contemporary sense further underscores this chapter’s argument that this period lacked a coherent sexual regime that organized—and disciplined—people’s desires in the image of European psychiatry.

Of course, the analysis I have presented must, of necessity, bracket temporarily the issue of how meaning can dynamically change in their various pragmatic contexts. So the prior terms can admittedly be mobilized differently as they move from one context to another or within multiple frames of a single context. Nevertheless, a diachronic analysis of a broad range of documents yields insight into the historical limits and social life of the terms that signify that elusive but ever critical word: sex.

### III. Psychoanalysis and the Status of Homosexual “Love”

Further evidence of the selective and non-pervasive reception of psychoanalysis in the colony can be gleaned from the representational status of homosexual love. Some versions of psychoanalysis assume that a child’s gender development in a nuclear family relies on the primary mechanism of the incest taboo whereby the mother and father assume symbolic positions. To illustrate this mechanism, Judith Butler explains the relationship as follows: “The boy will become a boy to the extent that he recognizes that he cannot have his mother, that he must find a substitute woman for her; the girl will become a girl to the extent that she recognizes she cannot have her mother, substitutes for that loss through identification with the mother, and then recognizes she cannot have the father and substitutes a male object for him.” Butler continues, “To become part of culture means to have passed through the gender-differentiating mechanism of this taboo” (p120).<sup>81</sup> One of the far-reaching consequences of this mechanism is that it disavows a wide range of alternative kinship relations including same-sex ones, rendering them impossible, unintelligible or unreal. Butler states, “[H]omosexual love emerges as the unintelligible within the intelligible: a love that has no place in the name of love, a position within kinship that is no position” (p.160).<sup>82</sup> Queer scholars have criticized this theory of gender development from a number of different directions, and so I will not repeat those critiques in detail here.<sup>83</sup> In regard to the Vietnamese context, some cultural critics did debate these normative questions—of incest, kinship and homosexual love—but failed to reach a consensus. On the contrary, the status of homosexual love remained a site of ongoing cultural conflict.

#### *Quandaries of the Incest Taboo*

As early as the 1930s, some Vietnamese thinkers were already pondering about the cultural limits of kinship. In the *New Women’s News*, the writer Chuong Dan, publishing a report about lesbianism in China, invoked a community of women who solely loved women and also made mention of incestuous and cross-generational marriages by both men and women.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Génibrel, *Dictionnaire Annamite-Française : Comprenant, 1° Tous Les Caractères De La Langue Annamite Vulgaire. Avec L’indication De Leurs Divers Sens Propres Ou Figurés, Et Justifiés Par De Nombreux Exemples. 2° Les Caractères Chinois Nécessaires À L’étude Des Tứ Thơ, Ou Quatre Livres Classiques Chinois. 3° La Flore Et La Faune De L’indo-Chine.*

<sup>81</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> In addition to *Undoing Gender*, see also Fuss, *Identification Papers*.

<sup>84</sup> Dân, Chuong. "Những Tục Lạ Về Nam Nữ Ở Thế Gian, Phần 1 [Unusual Customs between Men and Women in the World, Part 1]." *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 36 (1930): 12-13; Dân, Chuong. "Những Tục Lạ Về Nam Nữ Ở Thế Gian, Phần 2 [Unusual Customs between Men and Women in the World, Part 2]." *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 37 (1930): 10-11.

Significantly, the writer does not use the contemporary term for “homosexuality” (“*đồng tính luyến ái*”) to describe these lesbians. Instead, their relations are referred to as the “custom of women loving each other” (“*cái tục bạn gái luyến-ái nhau*”), hence emphasizing both the quality and activity of the relationship rather than a discrete identity. In describing these practices, the article insisted on the value of, and respect for other cultures, underscoring the idea of cultural relativism. Although other cultures may exhibit “unusual” practices to us, according to the author, these practices may appear normal to the cultures in question. Writing during this period of French colonialism, the author remarks rhetorically: “If the Annamese during the period of King Tu Duc had not considered French customs strange (*đi dich*) and had followed them, we wouldn’t be where we are today!” In other words, the author criticizes the insularity of the former imperial reign and implies that the Annamese are behind the times, presumably, because they had not assimilated French culture sooner. Although this comparison may reflect an unwarranted admiration for the colonizers, it also suggests a remarkable receptiveness towards cultural, sexual and gendered differences.

This same attitude appears in another article on the issue of incest. One writer noted that although incest seems to be a taboo since time immemorial, s/he questioned whether, in the final analysis, the prohibition was valid. The writer explains, “In the West, there seems to be no rhyme or reason as to how people marry each other, regardless of whether the person is from the same extended family [*“bà con dòng họ”*]. In China, it is quite common for cousins to marry each other.” S/he continues: “Further, some doctors in the West say that incest is harmful. But others say that it is not at all. For this reason, the issue of marriage within the same family [*“vấn đề đồng tánh kết hôn”*] is still uncertain [*lôi thôi*].”<sup>85</sup> Here it is worth noting that although I have chosen to translate the term “*đồng tánh*” as “same family” based on the context of the passage’s incest theme, in contemporary discourse the same term is ordinarily used to refer to “homosexuality” (“*đồng tính*” or “*đồng tánh*” for southern dialects). The former meaning is consistent with the one provided by an 1898 Annamite-French dictionary, which furnishes the following definition for “*đồng tính (tánh)*”: “De la même famille (par ex: Lê, Nguyễn, Châu, Trần, etc.) (p.231).”<sup>86</sup> These documents call into question, then, not only the incest taboo and its presumptive universality as the foundation of culture, but also the contemporary usage of the very term for homosexuality. As I have already noted earlier, “*đồng tính*” fails to travel across temporalities, signifying something different in this period.

Indeed, Dao Duy Anh’s *Sino-Vietnamese Dictionary*<sup>87</sup> published in 1932 distinguishes between the meaning of the terms “same sex” (*đồng tính*) and “homosexuality” (*đồng tính luyến ái*). Whereas Dao Duy Anh designates the first to mean, literally, two people of the same sex (“*même sexe*”), the second refers to “*amour homosexuel*” (p.306; French in original), a conjunction of the terms “same-sex” (*đồng tính*) and “love” (*luyến ái*).<sup>88</sup> By contrast, a current Vietnamese-English dictionary uses either term—“*đồng tính*” or “*đồng tính luyến ái*”—to mean both “homosexual” or “homosexuality,” excising the word “love” altogether, possibly due to its

<sup>85</sup> [NoAuthor]. “Con Cô, Con Cậu Có Lấy Nhau Được Không? [Can Cousins Marry Each Other?].” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (New Women’s News) 41 (1930): 24.

<sup>86</sup> Génibrel, *Dictionnaire Annamite-Française : Comprenant, 1° Tous Les Caractères De La Langue Annamite Vulgaire, Avec L’indication De Leurs Divers Sens Propres Ou Figurés, Et Justifiés Par De Nombreux Exemples, 2° Les Caractères Chinois Nécessaires À L’étude Des Tứ Thư, Ou Quatre Livres Classiques Chinois, 3° La Flore Et La Faune De L’indo-Chine.*

<sup>87</sup> Dao Duy Anh, *Hán Việt Từ Điển (Sino-Vietnamese Dictionary)* (Saigon: Trung Thi, 1932).

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

implied meaning *or* due to homosexuality's now pejorative connotation.<sup>89</sup> The historical shift in the meaning of the term “đồng tính” suggests the limits of the power, in the 1930s, of a discrete and institutionalized homo- and heterosexual regime. It is possible that Dao Duy Anh's emphasis on “homosexual love” coincides with the broader social youth movements for love and marriage freedom.

*The Status of Homosexual Love*

In her biographical study of the lives of Nguyen An Ninh and Phan Van Hum, Judith Henchy notes that neither man adhered to the formal rituals of the bourgeois nuclear family. Neither, for instance, took seriously the marriage institution; Phan Van Hum, in fact, continued the practice of polygamy and found himself a second wife. Interpreting these acts as one form of political refusal, Henchy writes, “Many of this generation of radical men did not marry their partners... I understand this as a refusal to recognize the legal authority of the state.” Henchy continues, “[I]t is also a reflection of the attitudes in post WWI Europe that these men were introduced to. In the interview with Phan Van Hum on the question of protestation... he openly referred to his justification of **free love as a principle**.” (p.217, my emphasis).<sup>90</sup> This milieu of “free-love” is relevant to the subject of homosexuality insofar as it expanded the normative limits of what was possible.

Consider, for example, the following theatrical comedy published in the Saigonese journal the *New Women* [Đàn Bà Mới] (not to be confused with *New Women's News* [Phu Nu Tan Van]). “Love and Sexual Desire”<sup>91</sup> recounts the impending engagement of Lan, a university student, and Sinh, a writer and poet. They live under the same roof but sleep in separate beds. One day Lan comments that she appreciates Sinh's poetry because it promotes a platonic kind of love, pure as the flower's “morning dew,” one that transcends the flesh's “dirt and filth.”<sup>92</sup> One evening, as the two get ready for bed, however, Lan feels mischievous and sidles up to Sinh. But no sooner does Lan embrace him than she is startled by the size of his breast, even larger than hers. At that moment, Lan realizes that Sinh is, in fact, a woman. In response, Sinh comments, “Well, if this is the spiritual kind of love, then man or woman, what's the difference?”<sup>93</sup> The conversation turns to the subject of love and sex, to which Lan, once again, exalts the former. Sinh challenges her reasoning, claiming that Lan should, therefore, be open to loving women. Sinh accuses Lan of “self-deception” (“tự dối mình”). The ensuing dialogue proceeds as follows:

**Sinh:** Of course you are! You have no clue that love is love, so do not confuse love with sexual desire. If you admit to loving me through that “love” of yours, then why must I be a man before you can love me?

**Lan:** But I cannot love a woman!

**Sinh:** If this is the spiritual kind of love, then there is no difference in loving a woman or man, is there!

**Lan:** Of course there is. Women are very different from men!

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<sup>89</sup> Bui Phung, *Vietnamese English Dictionary* (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Thế Giới (World Publishing House), 2003).

<sup>90</sup> Henchy, “Performing Modernity in the Writings of Nguyễn an Ninh and Phan Văn Hùm.”

<sup>91</sup> [NoAuthor], “Kịch Vui: Ái Tình Và Dục Tình (a Comedy: Love and Sexual Desire),” *Đàn Bà Mới (The New Women)* 54 (1936).

<sup>92</sup> The original quotations: “hạt sương buổi sáng trên cánh hoa;” “bụi bậm làm bản nó” [irregular spelling in original](p.4)

<sup>93</sup> The original quotation: “Thì yêu nhau về tinh thần mà, đàn bà hay đàn ông có quan hệ gì?” (p.4).

**Sinh:** “Chớ sao! Em chả biết ái tình là ái tình, chớ nên đem ái tình trộn lẫn với dục tình. Vậy nếu em quả lòng yêu tôi, yêu bằng cái ‘ái tình’ theo chủ nghĩa em hiểu thì cứ gì tôi là đàn ông em mới yêu?”

**Lan:** “Nhưng tôi không thể yêu người đàn bà được!”

**Sinh:** Nếu đã gọi là yêu tinh thần thì yêu đàn bà cũng như đàn ông, chớ khác gì!”

**Lan:** “Khác lắm chớ ! Đàn bà khác đàn ông lắm chớ”

After Lan insists on a break-up in the final lines, Sinh criticizes her hypocrisy and all those like her who try to confuse love for sexual desire. If the younger generation were truly in search for “love,” Sinh states, then “men can also love men, and women can also love women.”<sup>94</sup> But people are also “animals” (“con vật”) with “sexual desire” (nhục dục) and despite the pyrotechnics, according to Sinh, this “sexual desire” will manifest itself. Here are those concluding lines:

Because there is sexual desire, there is love for women. However much you wish to hide it, the animal that is sexual desire will rear its head in all forms of people’s love! People have the tendency to be dishonest with themselves. If they desire one thing, they might as well say so. Instead, they say they are in love with something else.

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Vì có nhục dục nên mới có ái tình với đàn bà. Dầu em có che đậy tới đâu thì con thú nhục dục nó vẫn lộ đầu ra trước trong hết các cuộc tình duyên của loài người ! Loài người bao giờ cũng có tánh dả dối, yêu cái ấy thì cứ bảo là yêu cái ấy việc gì lại bảo là yêu về cái khác. [archaic spelling in original] (p.4)

In this passage, the criticism of hypocrisy against the “free-love” movement seems straightforward: “free-love” is, in effect, a subterfuge for free-sex, where “sex” is understood as a debased and negative attribute euphemized as love. While this criticism is clear enough, the precise status of same-sex relations remains an open question. The problem derives, in part, from how one ought to interpret the relation between “love” and “sexual desire,” on the one hand, and, on the other, Sinh’s response towards both Lan and the implied reader in the metadiegetic conclusion. In the context of the drama, what role does the example of same-sex relations play in the broader argument against hypocrisy? Do same-sex relations serve to illustrate their viability as one form of **love**, one that Lan should take seriously? In this sense, one could interpret Sinh’s metadiegetic commentary as a proto-lesbian manifesto: “Because there is sexual desire, there is love for women.” Conversely, the opposite interpretation could also hold. If the example of same-sex relations serves as a *reductio* against Lan’s idealization, then the meaning of the play would be the impossibility of Lan’s desire for Sinh as a woman. Since people’s fundamental “animal” desire will surface in the end and since Lan’s desire is heterosexual, Lan can never love Sinh who, in turn, can never have Lan. But if “animal desire” is innate and innate things are therefore culturally acceptable, one could still argue that the “innateness” of same-sex desire would therefore be acceptable. Perhaps a more devastating interpretation would be to claim that, within the play’s own terms, “animal desire” is considered *fundamentally* heterosexual, in which case same-sex relations would be relegated to the impossible realm of irreality, reflected perhaps in the play’s ending with the dissolution of the relationship.

Even if we grant the latter interpretation, we would still not have exhausted the ways in which same-sex relations may be redeemed. That is because, regardless of a claim to its presumptive heterosexuality, the “animal desire” that “rears its head,” may not be the form that

<sup>94</sup> The original quotation: “đàn ông cũng có thể có ái tình với đàn ông, đàn bà cũng có thể có ái tình với đàn bà!” (p.4).

human relations *ought* to take. It may be that life is short, nasty, violent and brutish, for instance, but that does mean that societies aspire to this dystopia. Even if Sinh's point is that homosexual relations fail to reflect the actual order of things, that people are sexually frustrated creatures and fundamentally heterosexual to boot, it does not follow that these relations ought to be morally condemned; after all, same-sex desire is also linked to a transcendent form of "love" that exceeds the base desires of the flesh, a form propagated albeit spuriously by the "free-love" movement. The terms of the debate, then, could still be interpreted in favor of same-sex relations. Therefore, even if one cannot claim without a shadow of a doubt that the play depicts same-sex relations in a favorable light, neither can one claim that it harbors a demonstrable animus towards them.

Finally, regardless of the interpretation one adopts, the play would still serve as an invaluable source of evidence showing that, for a brief period, the status of homosexual relations was open to cultural *debate*—a possibility in the social imagination if not in reality. As Judith Butler has written, "The thought of a possible life is only an indulgence for those who already know themselves to be possible." She continues, "For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity" (31).<sup>95</sup> Whether conceived as a form of transcendent love or immanent desire, the homosexual relations depicted in this play were not yet the sign of criminality that they had been in nineteenth-century France<sup>96</sup> or the pathology that they would become in contemporary Vietnam.

Indeed, the questions raised by this theatrical "comedy" parallel another debate taking place elsewhere in the *New Women's News*. In an article entitled "Love in Humanity and Love in Literary Language," Lê Văn Thợ provides perhaps one of the most candid accounts of the status of homosexuality in this period.<sup>97</sup> He begins by acknowledging the public anxiety over the survival of the human race, consistent with natalist rhetoric in France and the preoccupation over the nation's population decline in the aftermath of World War I. According to Martha Hanna, France had lost 1.3 million young men in combat; coupled with the decline in birthrate, this loss led to intense concerns over "national extinction"; hence, after 1918, reproduction in France became a "patriotic obligation" (p.204).<sup>98</sup> With respect to the article in question, Le Van Tho advanced the opposite argument, claiming that "love"—not reproduction—was vital to human existence, what he calls one's "raison d'être" (p.14). Drawing on several ethnographic accounts, he maintains that love ought to belong to those conditions fundamental to society's persistence. He invokes the case of the "primitive Indians" and reasons by analogy that if their "bare" existence required "love," so too would more advanced civilizations. He explains, "Here is further proof of the theory. If anyone has ever traveled to the native-Indian regions and can comprehend their language and customs, he would affirm that the material world gives rise to love; since their brains are still at a cognitively primitive stage, they do not aspire to any higher level ideological system; they merely live on the basis of simple activities such as eating, drinking ..." (p.15).<sup>99</sup> But since they still perform rituals of love-making, so the reasoning goes,

<sup>95</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*.

<sup>96</sup> William A. Peniston, "Love and Death in Gay Paris: Homosexuality and Criminality in the 1870s," *Homosexuality in Modern France*, eds. Jeffrey Merrick and Jr. Bryant T. Ragan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>97</sup> Lê Văn Thợ, "Ái Tình Với Nhân Loại Và Ái Tình Với Ngôn Ngữ Văn-Chương [Love in Humanity and Love in Literary Language]," *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News)* 251 (1934).

<sup>98</sup> Martha Hanna, "Natalism, Homosexuality, and the Controversy over Corydon," *Homosexuality in Modern France*, eds. Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant T. Ragan, Jr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>99</sup> The original quotation: "Đây lại là một cái bằng cứ hiển nhiên cho thuyết ấy. Ai có đi qua mấy xứ mán-mọi và có biết phong tục ngôn ngữ của bọn ấy thì thấy quả rằng vật-chất sanh ra ái-tình, vì đầu óc chúng còn đơn sơ mộc-mạc

“love” must therefore be a fundamental element of social organization. For Le Van Tho, this idea of “love” also includes same-sex relations. He points to single-gender ethnic communities in China that, as elsewhere, are still able to survive and flourish. The writer reasons that if a particular community were ever to lack the “male and female” kind of love, there will always be other kinds that can equally provide meaning: relations between parents, siblings, friends and those of the same sex. The writer states:

I have said that without love humanity cannot survive. I have read that in the universe there are ethnic communities that are solely male or female, such as that in Tibet of China, yet those communities still survive like elsewhere. One must also understand that even if there were not the male and female opposite gender kind of love, there would inevitably be another type of love as a replacement in order to provide meaning for society’s existence, such as the love between sisters, parent-child, siblings, or father-children (in those single-gender societies, they drink or eat something in order to bear children), friendships etc. *and especially the love between people of the same gender.* (p.15; italics in original)

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Tôi nói nhân loại không có ái tình thì không tồn tại được, nhưng tôi có đọc sách thấy nói trong vô -trụ có nhiều dân-tộc chỉ có một giống người nam hay là một giống người nữ không thôi, như dân tộc Tây-tạng bên Tàu mà mấy dân tộc ấy cũng sống còn vinh viễn như ai. Tuy vậy ta phải hiểu rằng nếu không có cái ái tình nam nữ của hai giống khác nhau, thì thế nào cũng phải có cái tình gì khác thế vào chỗ khiêm-khuyết đó để làm cái lý do tồn tại cho xã hội đó mới được, như tình chị em, tình mẹ con, tình anh em hay cha con (ở trong một cái xã hội chỉ có một giống nam hay một giống nữ, tuy không có vợ có chồng chớ phải có con, uống nước gì đó hay ăn thứ gì đó mà sanh con) tình bè bạn v.v. *mà nhất là cái tình ở giữa hai người cùng một giống với nhau.* (p.15, archaic spelling and italics in original)

It is noteworthy that for this writer the means of reproduction in these single-gender communities, though important, are not privileged as the primary axis around which kinship ties ought to be organized; other forms of relations could be equally viable. In fact, as long as the reproductive function is fulfilled, alternative kinship networks are possible and, as the writer emphasizes, especially those that are homosexual in character. Le Van Tho proceeds by providing examples that he has witnessed in Vietnam:

Those who have attended the major schools and also roomed and boarded there all know of a strange desire arising there between male or female friends; in Saigon, it is called ‘cô’; in Hue, it is called ‘**thủ xú**’ [to commit a vice]. The schools in Euro-America are the same. Two male or female friends respectively caress and kiss each other even get into fights with each other, no different from husbands and wives...those with a stronger, firmer and broader-minded disposition wield the rights like those of a husband, and those who are soft and weak like thread are the wives...if they do not encounter any difficulties, those odd amorous couples would probably tie the ‘one-hundred year knot’ as well... **Take that as a case in which to reason that in this society those male and female types are no different from anyone.** That is why I believe that humanity needs

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nào đã có nghĩ gì đến những tư-tưởng cao-xa; chúng chỉ sống trong vòng vật chất như ăn cơm, uống nước, vợ chồng mà thôi, mà chúng cũng một niềm tào khang tắm-mần hay là cũng làm thói trong dẫu trên Bộc như các dân tộc văn-minh ở các xứ khác” (p.15; archaic spelling in original). Tho, “Ái Tình Với Nhân Loại Và Ái Tình Với Ngôn Ngữ Văn-Chương [Love in Humanity and Love in Literary Language].”

love in order to thrive, if not this type of love at least another type, and all are in the end still love. (my emphases).

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Các ngài ai có đi học các trường lớn và có ăn ở luôn trong trường đều biết một cái tình lạ phát sanh giữa hai người bạn trai hay bạn gái; ở Sài-gòn kêu cái đó là ‘cô’, còn ở Huế gọi là ‘thủ xú.’ Các trường bên Âu-Mỹ cũng vậy. Hai người bạn trai hay hai người bạn gái ấy cũng âu-yếm, hun-hít nhau và cũng đập đồ ghè tương chính ợt vì nhau, không khác gì cái cảnh chồng trai với vợ gái... người nào tánh cứng-cỏi mạnh bạo và phóng khoáng thì được có cái quyền như quyền người chồng, còn người nào mềm mỏng yếu đuối và ‘kim chi’ thì làm vợ... Nếu không có sự gì trắc trở thì mấy cặp tình nhân lạ đời ấy chắc cũng cùng nhau ‘kết tóc trăm năm’... **Cứ lấy đó mà suy thì biết ở trong cái xã-hội chỉ có giống nam hay giống nữ kia cũng thế chứ không có khác gì.** Cho nên tôi tưởng rằng nhân loại cần phải có tình mới sống được, không có tình này cũng phải có tình kia, nhưng cũng đều là ái tình cả. (p.15-16; spelling in original; my emphases).

The writer in this passage refers to same-sex relations as “strange” or “odd” relative to his own experience and to the dominant heterosexual one. Indeed, the term “thủ xú” literally means to “commit a vice.” Yet, the writer of this passage appears relatively candid in his discussion of Vietnamese same-sex relations, even analogizing them to typical married couples. This act of “othering” is analytically distinct from the more insidious mechanism of a “dynamics of displacement” whereby “homosexual desire” is, without qualification, relegated to the “discursive spaces of marginality, silence, confusion, and Otherness” (9).<sup>100</sup> One could object, I suppose, by arguing that same-sex persons lack a voice in this passage insofar as someone *else* is representing them, even comparing them to the norms of heterosexuality, further proof of the scandal of the “dynamics of displacement.” The study of how an “outsider” views a particular group, however, is still a valid form of analysis because such a study can illumine both the extent and form, if any, that this “displacement” takes. As the prior passage suggests, whatever kind of “displacement” may be taking place, it is not categorically pernicious in each and every context. Notably, if Mr. Le Van Tho is comparing homosexual relations to those of heterosexuals, even to the conventional marriage form, then this “displacement” is probably *not* a process of injurious “othering.” Like the rhetorical techniques used in the army women documents, Le Van Tho domesticates the unfamiliar and foreign: “those male and female types are no different from anyone.” Whatever differences may exist, the writer considers them part and parcel of a larger “humanity.”

Of course, Le Van Tho’s view most likely reflects a cultural minority. The argument up until now has *not* been to make any determinations about the norms of mainstream culture—a task best left to the statistician or demographer. Indeed, this period seems to lack a ubiquity of evidence concerning the normativity of same-sex desire compared, say, with the Japanese pre-Tokugawa period (before 1568) where Leupp writes, even straight people fantasized about same-sex relations.<sup>101</sup> Nevertheless, Le Van Tho’s attitude is consistent with other radical visions of his time, such as Phan Van Hum’s efforts to abolish the traditional nuclear family, the

<sup>100</sup> Vinh, “Deviant Bodies and Dynamics of Displacement of Homoerotic Desire in Vietnamese Literature from and About the French Colonial Period (1858-1954).”

<sup>101</sup> After an analysis of the premodern Japanese story of *Torikaebaya* [The changelings], Leupp quotes the *Princeton Companion to Classical Japanese Literature* which states, “[T]here must have been men and women of the time who wondered what it was like to be of the other sex, and perhaps even some who would have liked a try at change. The work goes no small distance in showing how society defines maleness or femaleness on bases termed sexual but actually social” (26). Leupp, *Male Colors: The Construction of Homosexuality in Tokugawa Japan*.

hermaphrodite's fundamental re-organization of gender relations, the unknown frontiers of human sex-changes, and so forth. Le Van Tho's piece joins these other documents in claiming that "love" of all kinds, including same-sex love, is not only viable but also fundamental to society's persistence.

Thus far, I have sought to document the ways in which the status of same-sex relations in certain circles was open to debate. Hence, the argument does *not* require use of a "random sample" to test whether there was support from the entire culture, much less from the majority—a method whose historical invention and normative premises should also be critically scrutinized.<sup>102</sup> Nor would it be enough to show just *some* support for same-sex relations. Rather, in studying how certain genders and sexualities come to pose a "problem," the argument highlights those moments of struggle where others were assailing the idea of same-sex relations.

This point is evidenced by the journal's prefatory comments. In a subsequent edition, the *New Women's News* published a piece by Dinh Trong Le entitled, "The Sources of Love: A Response to Le Van Tho."<sup>103</sup> In its preface the *New Women's News* wrote, "The two parties come from different schools of thought in dispute with each other and that is their own prerogative. This periodical endorses neither Mr. Le nor Mr. Dinh, and presents the original pieces in their entirety to pave the path for debate" (p.12).<sup>104</sup> One could attribute this "neutrality" to the best practices of journalism. Even so, these remarks provide further indication of the contested status of same-sex relations.

In his rebuttal, Dinh Trong Le disputes Le Van Tho's conception of the fundamental relationship between materiality and desire. He first notes that Le Van Tho's definition of the "material" implies that human relations arise out of a "plaisir sexuel" (French in original) and cannot therefore be adequately called true "love." Drawing on the theories of "Hector Durville," a French occultist who apparently promulgated the notion of relational magnetism,<sup>105</sup> Dinh Trong Le explains, "[D]eux fluides ou deux pôles de nom contraire s'attirent; deux fluides ou deux pôles de même nom se repoussent" (p. 12; French in original). Through this atomistic mechanism of attraction and repulsion, according to Dinh Trong Le, desire between men and women is the means by which these forces are reconciled. He writes:

Based on the above reasons, I can say the following: the sexual intercourse between man and woman is merely a means for the activity of love between opposite genders (**at times there can be two people of the same genders**; later, I will touch on this topic), to be reconciled with and complement each other (p.13; my emphasis).

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Dựa vào những lý ở trên, tôi có thể nói rằng: sự giao-hợp [sexual intercourse] của nam-nữ chỉ là một cái trong những cái phương tiện [means] của ái tình nó làm cho cái nguyên-lý

<sup>102</sup> See James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson and Harry Harootunian, eds., Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice, and Persuasion across the Disciplines (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994).

<sup>103</sup> Dinh Trong Lê, "Nguyên Ủy Của Ái Tình: Mấy Lời Bàn Với Ông Lê Văn Thơ [the Sources of Love: A Response to Le Van Tho]" Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (New Women's News) 257 (1934).

<sup>104</sup>The original quotation: "Hai nhà đứng về hai phái khác nhau, bàn cãi, hoặc không gặp nhau, đó là chỗ riêng của hai nhà. Bồn-báo không thiên về thuyết của ông Lê hay ông Đình gì cả, nên cứ nguyên-văn đăng báo để mở đường tranh-biện" (p.12).

<sup>105</sup> Foucault discusses the practice of magnetism in psychiatric practice: "The third system of tests in the psychiatric practice of the first two-thirds of the nineteenth-century is magnetism and hypnosis... In magnetic practice at the end of the eighteenth-century, the magnetizer was basically someone who imposed his will on the magnetized, and so when psychiatrists had the idea of using magnetism within psychiatry—around 1820 to 1825 at Salpêtrière—it was precisely to reinforce further the effect of power that the doctor wanted to attach to himself" (p.284). Foucault, Psychiatric Power, Lectures at the Collège De France.

[principle] sanh-hoạt của hai người khác giống (cũng có khi hai người cùng một giống, tỷ nữa, tôi sẽ nói đến), được dung-hoà [reconcile], bình xướng mà thôi (p.13).

If sexual intercourse is the means by which opposite forces reach “reconciliation,” according to Dinh Trong Le, then Le Van Tho has confused the means with the ends. In Dinh’s view, desire is the means towards producing the goal of a state of equilibrium. Significantly, Dinh provides an exceptional case for some same-sex couples, presumably, those who correspond to this model of “reconciliation.” In other words, homosexuality is not conceptually excluded *in toto* from Dinh’s theory of desire. In the article’s second half, Dinh evaluates the consequences of this theory for cases of hermaphroditism and same-sex love—that is, the “love between people of the same gender.”<sup>106</sup> Dinh never uses the identity label “homosexual,” but describes such people through a cultural rhetoric of “love.” To refute Le Van Tho’s claim that “materialism” leads to desire, Dinh presents the hypothetical case of someone whose decorum and appearance are off-putting, one who lacks the “object” that produces pleasure. He states,

Supposing someone were to let me know that the person in question demonstrated objectionable and despicable decorum, especially by lacking the object necessary to producing pleasure (**like the shadow people**), then would I be someone who lost all pleasure and enthusiasm? (p.13; my emphasis; parentheses in original).

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[N]ếu ái các có nói rõ cho mình biết rằng, người ấy phong thể xấu-xa, hèn-hạ mà nhưt là thiếu cái vật làm cho khoái lạc vật chất (**như người bóng**) thì mình có ra người cụt hứng hay không? (p.13; spelling in original; my emphasis).

In the next paragraph, Dinh provides the answer: an emphatic no. He explains that while the other person may appear unseemly, he speculates that neither he nor anyone else would lose pleasure. He writes:

There may be people with objectionable and despicable decorum, but I have never witnessed the loss of the object that produces pleasure. Supposing there are people with such cases, as in the “half- male, half females.” But in those people, the organ simply makes the pleasure feel strange, that is all. The loss is not total. In regards to the question of love, according to many experienced people who tell me that those who are ‘half man, half woman’ have absolutely no sensation, the latter simply enjoy being **female and male spirit mediums**. Hence, the hypothetical question posed lies in the realm of the imagination only and cannot be realized.

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Phong thể [decorum] xấu xa hèn hạ thì có, chớ thiếu mất cái vật làm cho khoái-lạc [pleasure] vật-chật [sic] thì tôi chưa thấy và cũng chưa nghe thấy ai nói bao giờ. Hoặc giả cũng có những sự tương-tự như vậy, ấy là những người ‘ái nam ái nữ.’ Mà ở những người này, thì cái cơ quan [organ] nó làm cho khoái-lạc vật chất kỳ-dị [strange] đó thôi, chớ có thiếu mất hẳn đâu! Và về ái-tình thì theo lời nhiều người có kinh nghiệm nói với tôi, những hạng người ‘nửa đàn ông, nửa đàn bà’ này tuyệt-nhiên [absolutely] không có, họ chỉ thích làm ‘**đồng cô, đồng cậu**’ [**female and male spirit mediums**] mà thôi. Xem đó thì câu hỏi các có của ông chỉ nằm trong vòng tưởng tượng, và không có thể thành lập được (p.13; archaic spelling in original).

I have presented these passages in their entirety not so much to explicate Dinh Trong Le’s refutation of an esoteric theory, but rather to show the vocabulary that Dinh uses in describing certain sexual minorities, in this case, hermaphrodites--the “half males and half females.” In the

<sup>106</sup> The original quotation: “cái tình giữa hai người cùng một giống” (p.13; irregular spelling in original).

prior paragraph, he calls them the “shadow people.” These “shadow people,” Dinh tells us, can also assume the role of spirit mediums, which also happens to be the subject of much contemporary ethnographic research—due in no small part to their association with gender-crossing homosexuality.<sup>107</sup> Note, however, that Dinh considers the hermaphrodites a distinct group in and of themselves; he does not conflate them with the category of homosexuality. Yet, the contemporary Vietnamese slang term for male “homosexuals” is “female contaminated shadow” (“bóng lại cái”) or simply “shadow” (“bóng”).<sup>108</sup> By gendering male homosexuality with an overt femininity, the contemporary term thus links homosexuality with the practice of gender-crossing, the ultimate foil perhaps to the androcentric regime that counterposes the myth of a muscular heterosexuality to feminine meekness.<sup>109</sup> Yet, in this period this link is, at most, tenuous. In fact, if one considers the cases of gender plasticity that I have documented thus far e.g. army women disguised as men, almost none of them are associated with homosexuality per se. Further, based on my readings of spirit mediumships in more than a dozen different major journals and newspapers in this period, almost none link this gender-crossing figure to homosexuality. Le Van Tho does reveal that some homosexuals in Saigon are called, “cô” (“Miss”). But it is unclear if that term is truly a shortened version of “đồng cô” (“female spirit mediums”), or if it refers to male or female homosexuals; hermaphrodites; or a complex composite. Other sources suggest that the Saigonese term “cô” is, in fact, a shortened version for “amì cô.”<sup>110</sup> Hence, the relative weight of the evidence suggests that the claim for a link between homosexual love and gender-crossing in this period is unsubstantial. In the following passage, in fact, Dinh now refers to another class of people, namely those who love others of the same gender. He notes:

I have presented the knowledge of the similarities and differences on the origins of love for clarification through discussion with Mr. Le. In what follows I ought to make a passing reference to the love between those of the same gender that he believes can be substituted as that between people of different genders (p.12-13).

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Trở lên [Previously] là tôi đem những cái sở đắc [one’s knowledge] dị-đồng [similarities and differences] về nguyên-ủy, của ái tình mà thương-xác [to clarify through discussion] cùng ông Lê; dưới đây tôi tưởng nên nói qua về cái tình giữa hai người một giống mà ông cho rằng nó có thể thế cho cái tình giữa hai người khác giống (p.12-13).

<sup>107</sup> Karen Fjelstad and Nguyen Thi Hien, eds., Possessed by the Spirits: Mediumship in Contemporary Vietnamese Communities (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2006).

<sup>108</sup> This slang term for homosexuality is common local knowledge and is widely used, for instance, in stage comedies in the overseas Vietnamese music video series *Paris By Night*. Recently, a homosexual autobiography was published in Hanoi and used this term to refer to homosexuals. See Hoàng Nguyên and Đoàn Trang, Bóng: Tư Truyện Của Một Người Đồng Tính [Shadow: Stories Told by a Homosexual] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Học, 2008).

<sup>109</sup> Rather than seeing gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered or queer studies as the “Other” of women’s studies, this insight ought to remind these groups of their shared fate as sexual minorities and the imperative to form political coalitions to fight against a broader structural system of gender oppression. In his study of nineteenth-century French medical discourse, Robert Nye explains that the figure of the effeminate homosexual and mannish lesbian derives, in part, from the “misogynous outlook” of male doctors who were defending the traditional system of sexual difference (p.169). See Nye, “Sex Difference and Male Homosexuality in French Medical Discourse, 1830-1930.”

<sup>110</sup> Chí Thành, “Đời Tù Tội: Tình Giống Đực (Life in Prison: Male Love),” Công An (The Citizen) December 3 1938.

Despite his previous caveat about including homosexuals in his theory of love, Dinh now revokes his qualification and declares that homosexual love cannot be love at all:

In my view and those of many others, the love between those of the same genders is a disease of the nerves (**hystérie**) and not the love that he [Le Van Tho] believes. This disease is very dangerous and is the symptom of people's imagination, and since it would be a lengthy explanation, I ask the reader permission to speak of this subject at a later time (p.13; my emphasis).

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Theo tôi và là theo ý của nhiều người thì cái tình giữa cùng một giống là một bệnh về thần kinh (hystérie) đâu có phải là cái tình như ông đã tưởng lầm. Bệnh này nguy-hiêm lắm và còn có lắm cái hiện chứng trên sự tưởng tượng của người ta, nói ra rất dài, xin đọc giả cho phép tôi nói đến trong một dịp khác (p.12-13).

Dinh's connection between female hysteria and homosexuality in this passage recalls one of the four domains in Europe that Foucault cites as the "great strategic unities which, beginning in the eighteenth-century, formed specific mechanisms of knowledge and power centering on sex" (103).<sup>111</sup> Dinh hints at a potential problem with homosexuality; based on his reference to "hysteria" and "nerves" one might speculate that he is about to rehearse a psychoanalytic explanation. Unfortunately, however, we will never know precisely what that problem is. The historical record of the *New Women's News* abruptly stops in 1934. David Marr explains, "[T]he effects of the Depression reached Indochina" and the journal was "shut down by the government order in December 1934" (220).<sup>112</sup> Still, in this early period, regardless of the nature of the problem, homosexuality was still subject to vigorous debate. Unlike Foucault, both Le Van Tho and Dinh Trong Le found themselves in a different cultural context. Whereas Foucault was able to locate the emergence of a regime of sexuality, neither Le nor Dinh was then able to articulate a coherent homosexual class: just as there were different names for this group depending on the different locales, so there were different competing theories on the means and ends of sexual pleasure and desire. Since these theories could be applied to hetero- and homosexuals alike, they were not yet specific to any class of people. Indeed, whatever differences people may have exhibited, one common denominator tied them all together: the cultural rhetoric of **love**.

*Homosexual "Love" vs. Sodomy's Vice*

At this point, I wish to underscore a conceptual distinction between homosexual "love" and other possible forms of same-sex relations—in particular, sodomy. The modern regime of sexuality serves as a powerful episteme in and through which diverse subjects are filtered and by which they are subjugated. Eve Sedgwick writes that the "[E]pistemology of the closet has also been...on a far vaster scale and with a less honorific inflection, inexhaustibly productive of Western culture and history at large" (46).<sup>113</sup> That is why, in opposition to its power, Foucault made the rallying cry for "bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their **multiplicity**" (my emphasis).<sup>114</sup> Hence, while the presence of this regime implies, by necessity, a binary identity, the converse does not hold: the presence of same-sex relations does not imply the presence of this regime. By the same token, the regime's absence does not signify the lack of same-sex relations. Rather, these relations are one among many diverse kinds of sexual subjectivities.

<sup>111</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol 1*.

<sup>112</sup> Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1925-1945*.

<sup>113</sup> Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>114</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol 1*: p.157.

That is why I have tried to stress the competition among a multiplicity of different but interrelated discourses.

One example that illustrates this point is the case of sodomy. Whereas Dao Duy Anh in his *Sino-Vietnamese Dictionary* (1932) referred to same-sex relations (“đồng tính luyến ái”) as “homosexual love,” he defines “sodomy” (“kê gian”) in more ambivalent terms. He defines the latter practice as, “A male with a male or with a female who have sex at the anus like chickens; this practice is widespread in civilized countries (sodomy)” [“Con trai với con trai, hoặc với con gái gian dâm nhau nơi lỗ đít như gà, thói ấy rất lưu hành ở các nước văn minh (sodomie)” (p.417).]<sup>115</sup> “Ke gian” is the Vietnamese equivalent of the Chinese term “jijian.” The latter, in turn, was coined during the Tang Dynasty (618-1279) to denote “chicken lewdness” based on the belief that domesticated fowls engage in same-sex acts (Wah-Shan 23; Hinsch 88-9).<sup>116</sup> Hence, based on its etymological meaning, sodomy’s negative connotation may have derived from this classical era and persisted through the French colonial one. The Chinese T’ang period, however, as we all know, can hardly be described as homophobic, and so it would be a mistake to argue that, on the basis of sodomy’s negative valence alone, the culture as a whole was, therefore, homophobic. Yet, Nguyen Quoc Vinh has taken Dao Duy Anh’s definition of sodomy as unqualified evidence of the Vietnamese opprobrium against male homosexual desire. Vinh explains:

Đào Duy Anh's gloss is an [sic] uniquely curious example in the whole Vietnamese lexicography of the term, not merely for the **primacy it gives to homosexuality**, nor for its well-worn displacement of this primarily homoerotic desire to the natural analogy with fowl-like sexual practice, but for the rather gratuitous comment appended at the end almost as an afterthought: ‘this practice is very widespread in civilized countries’! As a result, the full force of identifiably homoerotic desire and homosexual practice in the Sino-Vietnamese term ‘kê gian’ (in contradistinction to its Chinese antecedent ‘jijian’) is thereby effectively displaced from the Vietnamese socio-cultural context (p.8; my emphasis).<sup>117</sup>

Vinh’s interpretation is problematic for several key reasons. First, note that Dao Duy Anh does *not* refer to sodomy in exclusively homosexual terms: “male with a male or **with a female**.” It is uncertain how one can interpret from this definition, presented in its entirety above, that it was giving “primacy” to homosexuality. Indeed, another Hanoi dictionary published in 1931 defines “ke gian” as the “the sexual habit of **substituting** a man for a woman” (“Thói gian-dâm, dùng đàn ông thay đàn bà” (p.262; my emphasis).<sup>118</sup> The idea of substitution implies that this practice is not exclusive to a male homosexual identity, but complicates the very link between practice and identity. Second, although Dao Duy Anh does compare sodomy to the activity of fowls, it is not self-evident that the final comment on the widespread character of this practice in “civilized” countries is a shameful “dynamics of displacement.” After all, Vietnam as a colony during this time was generally striving to live up to the impossible ideals of French civilization and prestige. Explaining the anxiety of Vietnamese intellectuals in response to this imposed standard, Marr writes that, “For Vietnam to be truly ‘civilized’ (*van minh*)...the majority of intellectuals were

<sup>115</sup> Anh, *Hán Việt Từ Điển* (Sino-Vietnamese Dictionary).

<sup>116</sup> Chou Wah-shan, "A World without Homo-Hetero Duality: Rewriting the Traditional Chinese History of Same-Sex Eroticism," *Tongzhi: Politics of Same-Sex Eroticism in Chinese Societies* (New York: Haworth Press, 2000), Hinsch, *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China*.

<sup>117</sup> Vinh, "Deviant Bodies and Dynamics of Displacement of Homoerotic Desire in Vietnamese Literature from and About the French Colonial Period (1858-1954)."

<sup>118</sup> [NoAuthor], *Việt-Nam Tự-Điển/ Hội Khai-Trí-Tiến-Đức Khôi Thảo* [Vietnamese Dictionary].

certain they had to promote an even tighter linkage between precise usage, the spoken language and mass literacy” (p.139).<sup>119</sup> There were, of course, others like Vu Trong Phung who satirized some of these ideals—as in the *Dumb Luck* scene in which “Mr. Civilization” is depicted, effeminately, primping himself. Hence, depending on the interpretation of the rhetorical function that “civilized countries” play in Dao Duy Anh’s definition, the so-called deviant status of sodomy is debatable. Yet, even if we were to grant that sodomy was an abominable vice, my point is still the same: the activity of sodomy is not entailed by the activity of same-sex relations. A definition that refers to homosexual relations as “love” and another that compares “sodomy” to bestial activity are conceptually incommensurable.<sup>120</sup>

Moreover, it is conceivable that a culture could forbid certain kinds of sexual practices i.e. statutory rape, while simultaneously supporting other viable forms of sexual relations. During the T’ang period, for example, the poetic and derogatory meanings of same-sex acts co-existed. Homosexual relations were referred to as the passions of the “cut sleeve” in reference to a mandarin who, called to duty, cut his sleeve to allow his lover to continue resting. Sodomy, by contrast, was associated with the lewd activity of domestic fowls. But even the latter interpretation is debatable. Wah-Shan notes that “All the terms describing same-sex sexual acts are rather poetic, with no sense of social or moral condemnation” (23).<sup>121</sup> Hence, one has to question the substantive degree of ignominy associated with “sodomy” (*jijian*). “[It] implies,” Wah-Shan explains, “disparagement rather than hostility” (23).<sup>122</sup> Explaining this interpretive problem, Hinsch writes that the Chinese character for “chicken” is ambiguous and could also refer to an ambiguously gendered condition. He states, “The Qing scholar Yuan Mei explains that the original character, also pronounced *ji*, depicted a field above a woman and denoted ‘a man being like a woman’” (p.89).<sup>123</sup> It was only in the later Qing era that the, “derogation *jijian*, rather than the more poetic and hence favorable terms ‘cut sleeve’ or ‘half-eaten peach’... appears in Qing laws restricting certain forms of homosexual activity” (89). Hence, by a parallel logic, it is plausible that the derogatory meaning of sodomy and the positive valence of “homosexual love” could have simultaneously existed in 1930s Vietnam, further underscoring the overarching point concerning the relative weakness, if not absence, in this period of a coherent and hegemonic sexual regime.

This distinction between sodomy and “homosexual love” helps us to interpret a rape scene in one of Vu Trong Phung’s short story, “Stratagems” (“Thủ Đoạn”).<sup>124</sup> Published in 1931 in Hanoi, the story depicts a scene in which a big boss, presumably French, asks one of his male Vietnamese servants to find him a female prostitute. Unable to find one quickly enough for the man’s immediate needs, the servant is forced to serve as the boss’s sexual receptor. The ensuing dialogue in broken French and Vietnamese follows. I have retained the original French in my translation:

<sup>119</sup> Marr, Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1925-1945.

<sup>120</sup> Unless one can demonstrate a general correlation between “love” and “vice,” and the dignity of bestiality in Vietnamese culture during this time, I take my distinction to be logically coherent. Further, recall that in the play “Love and Sexual Desire,” Sinh makes a distinction between the transcendence of homosexual love and the baseness of “animal desire.” See my analysis in the previous section.

<sup>121</sup> Wah-shan, “A World without Homo-Hetero Duality: Rewriting the Traditional Chinese History of Same-Sex Eroticism.”

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Hinsch, Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China.

<sup>124</sup> Vu Trong Phung, “Thủ Đoạn (Stratagems),” Chống Nạn Lên Đường (the Prevention of Vice on One's Journey), ed. Lai Nguyen An (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Hội Nhà Văn (The Writers Association Publishing House), 2000).

-Dis donc mon ami... Where is the decent *femme* who is supposed to come here tonight?...*Je m'ennuie tant cette nuit de samedi...*  
 -I have found one, but *elle* is busy with her sick son...  
 -*Tu mens...! Je vois que tu mens...!*  
 -*Mais non! J'ai trouvé une et je vous le jure... Seulement cet incident l'a empêchée de venir.*  
 -*Bon, tu vas recommencer ton role...*  
 -My God, *mon Dieu...*  
 -*Quoi? Tu n'es pas content...alors.*  
 -We've done it so much that I'm completely *malade...* and don't feel *plaisir* anymore. *L'excès en tout est mauvais...*  
 -*Alors, tu ne demanderais plus rien...hein! Plus rien... Non...sois gentil.* Ok...? Only one more time ... Whenever you can contact the decent *femme* I will stop. Come on, *encore une dernière fois je t'en prie...* You do not accept? (p.34).

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-Dis donc mon ami...Báo có *femme* tử tế đến tôi hôm nay đâu?...*Je m'ennuie tant cette nuit de samedi...*  
 -Tôi đã tìm được rồi, nhưng *elle* bận vì con trai ở nhà *malade...*  
 -*Tu mens...! Je vois que tu mens...!*  
 -*Mais non! J'ai trouvé une et je vous le jure... Seulement cet incident l'a empêchée de venir.*  
 -*Bon, tu vas recommencer ton role...*  
 -Trời ơi, *mon Dieu...*  
 -*Quoi? Tu n'es pas content...alors.*  
 -Làm nhiều quá tôi đến *malade* mất...mà không thấy *plaisir* nữa đâu. *L'excès en tout est mauvais...*  
 -*Alors, tu ne demanderais plus rien...hein! Plus rien... Non...sois gentil.* Nhá...? Một lần nữa thôi mà... Bao giờ anh gọi được *femme* tử tế thì tôi thôi. Đi, *encore une dernière fois je t'en prie...* Anh không bằng lòng à? (p.34).

The servant succumbs after the boss threatens him with loss of private property. The scene concludes with a voyeuristic allusion to other male servants who witness the spectacle by peeking through the crevice door. The episode ends with the statement: “Oh! What a heavenly scene!” (“Ôi! Cảnh thần tiên!”). We do not know from whose perspective the concluding statement is issued—narrator? author? servants? implied reader? If the perspective is the author’s, one can reasonably infer that it is an ironic statement.<sup>125</sup> By depicting an instance of sodomy within a same-sex rape context, Vu Trong Phung may have intended to convey any number of things, such as the violation of Vietnam by French colonial rule, the emasculation of Asian men, or the uncivilized nature of the French themselves. For the purposes of our discussion, however, the scene helps to underscore the multi-faceted, ambivalent and conflicted character of “same-sex relations” in this early period. Consider, for instance, the lack of any reference to the term “homosexuality” and the absence of a unified homosexual psyche or identity. The boss, at first, wanted a female prostitute. In her absence, the male servant became the effeminized substitute: “Whenever you can contact the decent *femme* I will stop,” the boss comments. After the act of violation, the male servant returns home, infuriated, and begins to abuse his wife physically, as if to regain, symbolically, the prestige of his masculinity. The

<sup>125</sup> For a discussion of Vu Trong Phung’s cynicism, see the introduction in Zinoman’s *Dumb Luck* (2002).

narrative focuses on the horrific effects of colonial violation on a presumptively heterosexual Vietnamese man. Although Vu Trong Phong chose the most culturally debased form of same-sex relations to allegorize the violence of the French civilizing mission, my main point is that this ignominious form could and did co-exist with other acceptable configurations, including but not limited to the notion of classical male friendship, male gender-crossing, and modern “homosexual love.”

If this argument is right, the sexual discourses available in the 1930s implied that certain homoerotic sentiments had outlets for their cultural expression. These outlets partly explain the relative nonchalant attitude, for instance, of Nguyen Duc Chinh and his homoerotic disclosure in “Letters from Poulo Condore” (as examined in the prior chapter). Equally blasé was the response by his family members--the younger brother, in particular, who chose to publish the letters and thereby expose them to the public eye.

#### **IV. The Absence of Homosexual Inversion: A Case of a Cross-Dressing Nun**

Finally, another reason to support the claim of the uneven spread of the psychiatric model of sexuality in colonial Vietnam is the failed association of gender-crossing with homosexuality, where the former was understood to represent the latter’s effeminacy, sterility and instability. In what follows, I examine a case of a cross-dressing nun, a scandal that shook newspapers throughout the colony at the end of the decade.

In an article dated April 30, 1940 the *The New Hanoi* (Hanoi Tân Văn) newspaper featured a story about the Dieu Ly controversy, an affair concerning a man who, “disguised” as a nun, lived in a convent for almost twelve years. Nguyen-van-Ba changed his given name to the feminine “Dieu Ly” (or “Ho-thi-Ly”) upon entering the convent. Dieu Ly would never have surfaced in the public limelight had it not been for a traffic accident. After a motorbike collision, she was sent to the hospital and placed in the women’s ward. A doctor who was inspecting her broken leg discovered, however, that “she” was in fact a “he.” The doctor immediately called the authorities who in turn forced a confession.

The vocabulary of fraud, impersonation, and disguise dominated press coverage in both Hanoi and Saigon, where news of the event first broke out. The front page of the daily newspaper *Saigon* announces, “Nguyen-V-Ba disguised [*đội lốt*] as a nun and took the name of Ho-Thi-Ly,” followed by the subheading, “Unmasking the Nun.”<sup>126</sup> Another article by the same newspaper is entitled, “What is strange about the Long-Van Temple?”<sup>127</sup> The *New Hanoi* featured another article: “Behind the back of the Buddha.” The newspaper also shows a cartoon of one nun asking the others, “After the Dieu Ly affair, we nuns will have to inspect each other to avoid the misfortune of fraudulent exchanges (*họa lộn sòng*)” (3).<sup>128</sup> On the May 18 cover page of the Hanoi journal *These Days (Ngay Nay)* appears a farcical picture of Dieu Ly, standing before the Sangha, the Buddhist community, exposed, ashamed, humiliated, her mustache intact. The heading states: “After the Dieu Ly Affair, a man pretending to be a woman, the Sangha discusses whether to have monthly inspections of monks and nuns.”

In each case, at issue was not the question of religion *per se*. Given that the scandal took place at a Buddhist temple, it was astonishing that not one newspaper or journal, not even the socially progressive *These Days (Ngay Nay)*, mentioned the legend of *Quan Am Thi Kinh*, the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy who cross-dressed as a monk. Although the stories are not identical,

<sup>126</sup> Hoa-Đường, “Trong Chùa Long-Vân Có Gì Lạ? (What Is Unusual About the Long Van Temple?),” *Saigon* April 23 1940.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> “Sau Lung Phat to (Behind the Back of the Buddha),” *Ha Noi Tan Van (The New Hanoi)* May 7 1940.

they nevertheless share structural and thematic parallels. When invoking this religious legend, in my view, the media could have linked the continuity of this event with a prior myth, producing a far more sympathetic narrative that conveyed some sense of “compassion” consistent with Buddhist principles. Indeed, the media was not even interested in Dieu Ly’s moral lapse in following the Buddhist precept of the Eight-Fold Noble Path of Right Speech, the equivalent of “thou shall not lie.” Rather, its target was precisely her failure to disclose the so-called “truth” of her sex.

This point is best illustrated in another cartoon. The June 3 cover page of *These Days* displays an image of a woman in a bikini, presumably, at a beach. Far from any religious community or sacred space, on the side are two monks one of whom asks the senior one whether the lady in question is truly a woman (“Sir, it is not entirely clear that the lady over there is truly a woman” [*Bach cu, chua chac co ta phai la dan ba*]).<sup>129</sup> Given the context of media coverage of this scandal, the cartoon is most likely ironic: how could the skimpily clad woman be anything but? By baring one’s body, the cartoon implies, one should be able to verify to oneself and to others one’s sexual and gendered identity. The joke is most likely on the head monk of the Long Van Temple who was supposedly fooled by Dieu Ly’s passing. I say “supposedly” because the story gets more complicated. In this cartoon, however, the use of irony serves to underscore gender’s purported immutability. Whereas the prior documents we examined demonstrate gender’s instability and contested character, this cartoon relies on the body in and of itself as sufficient evidence for gender recognition. Without acknowledging the power of cultural norms in influencing bodily size, girth and shape as well as its perception by both the viewer and viewed, the cartoon naturalizes the gender of the so-called “naked” body, thereby linking sex with gender.

At this point, it seems tempting perhaps to conclude that 1940 was a moment when we observe the heteronormative alignment of sex, gender and desire. After all, unlike the cases of gender plasticity we observed in the prior chapter, this scandal certainly demonstrates a foreclosure of sexual norms. One reporter covering the scandal posed the following question: “In the 12 years he lived with a pack of nuns, how often did this fake nun achieve moments of bliss?”<sup>130</sup> Likewise, another writer compared the scandal to one of Boccaccio’s love stories.<sup>131</sup> Although it is unclear which of the bawdy *Decameron* tales the author may be referring to, we do know that at least one involves a monk who attempts to seduce a young woman. In other words, these articles imply that since Nguyen-van-Ba is male, he must have pretended to be a nun to exploit this community of women. This was the insinuation by almost every other news article; a month after the affair had transpired, in fact, the writer Tu Mo crystallized this essential point in his satirical poem, “Breaking Commandments.”<sup>132</sup> But this insinuation also presupposes that Nguyen-van-Ba was a straight man. The fact of his cross-dressing **failed** to function as the overt sign of his gender *inversion*, the predominant belief in nineteenth-century European psychiatry of the pathology that inflicted homosexuals.

<sup>129</sup>“Sau Việc Ni Cô Diệu-Ly Giả Gái (after the Affair of the Dieu Ly Nun Pretending to Be a Woman),” *Ngay Nay (These Days)* 213 (1940).

<sup>130</sup> “Sau Lung Phật Tổ (Behind the Back of the Buddha),” *Hà Nội Tân Văn (The New Hanoi)* May 7 1940.

<sup>131</sup> Thẩm Chi, “Ni-Cô...Đực (a Male...Nun)” *Hà Nội Tân Văn (The New Hanoi News)* 1940.

<sup>132</sup> Tu Mo writes: “Pretending to be a woman, that monk there pads his chest/ makes a fraudulent exchange, in order to exploit the nuns...” (“Giả làm gái kia sư thầy độn vú/ Để lộn sông, gà gụ các sư cô”) Although the rhyme is lost in my crude translation, the poem actually parodies a Buddhist chant. Mo, T. Tu Mo, “Thơ Trào Phúng: Phá Giới (Humorous Satirical Poetry: Breaking Commandments)” *Ngay Nay (These Days)* 209 (1940).

Indeed, if Nguyen-Van-Ba was acting in bad faith, he certainly performed his female gender role exceedingly well. For twelve continuous years, the media admitted, Dieu Ly lived peacefully, blissfully and surrounded by a paradise of women—if only it had not been for that traffic accident. This male heterosexual fantasy, however, seemed implausible to at least one female writer. In an article entitled “The head monk Muon intended to deceive nobody,” Nhu-Hoa voiced her dissent. She pointed out that none of the parties involved could have predicted being in the public limelight.<sup>133</sup> Deception involves the deliberate falsification of information before an audience. In the case of Dieu Ly, the head monk knew of her cross-dressing and, in fact, welcomed and encouraged it. After all, he was the one who christened her “Dieu Ly.” The only “duped” audience, as it were, would have been the nuns themselves. Yet, none of the newspapers bothered to ask the nuns or investigate this lacuna. Some speculated, instead, that Dieu Ly and the head monk both conspired to exploit the community of nuns. The female writer Nhu-Hoa remained skeptical. This reporter quoted Dieu Ly’s parents who had commented that, “Our child is mad (*điên*); expressing compassion, the head monk merely brought him to the monastery to help cure him.”<sup>134</sup> This writer hinted, then, at an alternative explanation. She defended Dieu Ly’s “insanity.” If living in a peaceful monastery surrounded by nuns, she claimed, is tantamount to madness, then she too wanted to be “insane in this way.” I will not elaborate on the possibility that Nhu-Hoa may, in fact, be identifying with Dieu-Ly, thereby presenting a potential lesbian fantasy. In any case, despite the parent’s vocabulary of pathologization, Nhu-Hoa is suggesting that Nguyen-Van-Ba may represent a case of a man who dis-identifies with his socially prescribed gender—the possibility of a transgender person? The writer does not explicitly arrive at this conclusion. Unlike other reporters, however, she leaves the question unresolved and declares, “The Buddha is the Buddha of all humanity.” I tried to see whether the media followed up on the pending investigation but, unfortunately, found no further reports, and it may be that we too will have to leave the question unresolved.

The news coverage of this scandal nevertheless helps demonstrate the disjuncture between gender-crossing and homosexuality. In 1940, in contrast to prior years, the public’s conception of gender and sexuality certainly appeared to be narrowing insofar as the act of cross-dressing was deemed inappropriate. This effect may largely be a function of Vichy’s rise to power. Both Shawn McHale and David Marr note that the rise of European fascism contributed to a return to traditional values.<sup>135</sup> Yet, despite this neo-traditional swing, my overall point remains the same: the act of male cross-dressing, as this case dramatizes, failed to index neither the idea of homosexuality nor gender inversion.

### Conclusion

In sum, the period between 1930 and 1940 lacked an analogue of the modern sexual regime of disciplinary power that Foucault and other scholars have identified in the second half of nineteenth-century Europe. My argument is based on a negative inference. If this sexual regime did actually flourish, then we ought to be able to locate evidence of the effects of its

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<sup>133</sup> Nhu-Hoa, “Nào Sư Muôn Có Gạt Gắm Ai Đâu (the Buddhist Priest Muon Intended to Deceive Nobody),” *Saigon* April 22 1940.

<sup>134</sup> Nhu-Hoa, “Nhu-Hoa Muốn Điên Theo Kiểu Đó Quá (Nhu Hoa Wishes to Be Crazy in That Way)” *Saigon* 1940.

<sup>135</sup> McHale writes: “With the imposition of martial law in 1939, the administration reimposed strict control of public discourse. It tightened this grip under the Vichy government in the next few years.” (p.67). Likewise, Marr writes: “During the early 1940s a quasi-traditional mood seized a fair portion of the Vietnamese intelligentsia...In primary or secondary school curricula, teachers were advised to exercise increased determination between boys and girls” (p.233). McHale, “Printing, Power, and the Transformation of Vietnamese Culture, 1920-1945.”, Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1925-1945*.

power, the application of its “pincers”—as Foucault once said—on the bodies and psyche of the colonized.<sup>136</sup> Since this decade represents the tail end of French colonialism, we would further expect French culture to exert its most considerable impact during this period. Yet, closer examination of key cultural documents demonstrates a far more uneven imprint.

Psychoanalytic ideas did surface and the idea of homosexuality did make its way into the cultural discourse, but they lacked the same degree of authority as they did in Europe. The conditions were simply not ripe. Western medical institutions did grow in the colony, but they were also in competition with enduring indigenous ideas and tended to be available only in the urban centers and, even then, only to those who could afford them. Vietnamese renderings of psychoanalytic ideas lacked, for the most part, vicious acts of pathologization; on the contrary, ideas about the libido and same-sex sexuality were culturally translated and mobilized in the service of a different social cause: the free love movement. It is not surprising, then, that we observed the absence of a precise sexual vocabulary that would index something of a modern sexual regime. Instead, we found an array of terms that pointed to ideas about the *pleasures* of the flesh. Finally, the case of a male cross-dressing nun dramatizes the persistent separation of this practice from homosexuality and hence from gender inversion—one of the principle conceits of European psychoanalytic theory.

Consistent with my previous chapter, then, this claim thus supports my larger argument that the normative meaning of gender and sexuality in this period was far more dynamic and expansive than the contemporary scholarship has acknowledged. By contrast, in the contemporary period, as we shall see in the next chapter, the effects of this form of power are unmistakable; the sign of homosexuality will be densely and demonstrably bound up with the legacy of this psychoanalytic discourse.

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<sup>136</sup> Foucault, *Psychiatric Power, Lectures at the Collège De France*.:p.57.

### CHAPTER 3. The Epistemology of Gender: The Sexual Imagination and Homosexual Morphology in Contemporary Vietnam, 1986-2005

[A]t the...the very ascending of knowledge, of objectifying and objective rationality, of the very idea of universality...[t]he Other is no longer the unique person offering himself to the compassion of my responsibility, but an individual within a logical order or a citizen of a state in which institutions, general laws, and judges are both possible and necessary.<sup>1</sup>

--Emmanuel Levinas, "Being-for-the-Other"

What sort of hermeneutics do we need to read the subject in its tenuous relation to cultural emergence, a hermeneutics that does not take the self-constituting subject for granted, but reads its life-and-death struggle with its conditioning norms in the agrammatical styles of its emergence?<sup>2</sup>

--Judith Butler, "Agencies of Style for a Liminal Subject"

[A]ll disciplinary power has its margins.<sup>3</sup>

--Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power*

Much of the scholarship on contemporary Vietnam take as its point of departure an understanding of gender that is defined by the State. Since Vietnam's open-door policy and transition to a market-economy, this body of scholarship has demonstrated how the State has shifted its fundamental regulatory target to the "household-" or "family"- unit.<sup>4</sup> As a result, scholars have appropriated this unit as a concept in and through which to examine social problems related to gender. Danièle Bélanger and Jane Werner note that even though this unit is not the only site of gender's constitution, they nevertheless take this unit as the locus of analysis because it is where the "state and the global/market economy currently meet to regulate constructions of gender."<sup>5</sup> So scholars have explored questions, such as the deleterious effects of

<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Being-for-the-Other," Is It Righteous to Be?, ed. Jill Robbins (Palo Alto: Stanford University, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, "Agencies of Style for a Liminal Subject," Without Guarantees: In Honor of Stuart Hall eds. Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg and Angela McRobbie (London: Verso, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Foucault, Psychiatric Power, Lectures at the Collège De France.

<sup>4</sup> Jayne Werner and Danièle Belanger, eds., Gender, Household, State: Đổi Mới in Vietnam (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), Nguyen Huynh Chau, "Women and Family Planning Policies in Postwar Vietnam," Postwar Vietnam: Dilemmas in Socialist Development, eds. David Marr and Christine P. White (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University 1988), David W. Haines, The Limits of Kinship: South Vietnamese Households, 1954-1975, Southeast Asia Publications (Dekalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University, 2006), Bélanger and Barbieri, "Introduction: State, Families, and the Making of Transitions in Vietnam.", Drummond and Rydstrom, eds., Gender Practices in Contemporary Vietnam, Pham Van Bich, The Vietnamese Family in Change: The Case of the Red River Delta (Surrey: Curzon Press and Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Werner and Belanger, eds., Gender, Household, State: Đổi Mới in Vietnam.: p.23

the market on women-run households,<sup>6</sup> which in turn are linked to the effects of widespread prostitution. Still, other scholars have looked at how the new economy have opened up opportunities, allowing women simultaneously to support themselves, choose to remain single, or look towards other horizons in the transnational marriage market.<sup>7</sup> Generally speaking, in the current scholarship, cultural analysis tends to begin—and often end—with this foundational concept of gender that links it definitionally to marriage and the household.

In this chapter, I seek to illuminate another history of gender that gradually took shape during Vietnam's Renovation and Post-Renovation periods.<sup>8</sup> In taking up the State's fundamental definitions, scholars both gain and lose certain kinds of knowledge. They gain insight into the contours of the proper subject recognized by the State. But they lose sight of those who fail to conform to official standards for recognition—those on whom the State enacts both a physical and an epistemic violence to secure the normative boundaries of its various social programs based on its own definitions. These are the boundaries that the State must continually shore up, even as the very means of instituting those boundaries expose their fragility. As I shall suggest, the public discourse of this period exhibited a persistent anxiety focused on the epistemology of gender. In its anxiety, this discourse produced a morphology of the homosexual who was embodied in the ambiguous figure of the gender-crosser, a figure that is a vestige and translation of the discourse of gender inversion in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Europe. In the Vietnamese case, however, this figure is less an index of a stable identity as much as the name for a categorical crisis over the normative regulation of gender—the rhetorical name for those moments of performative failure that nonetheless disclose the possible regions of experiential gendered singularity foreclosed by the State.<sup>9</sup> As the State turned its gaze towards regulating the nuclear family, it had to specify norms of gender recognition and comportment. In enforcing these norms, the State simultaneously had to exclude certain kinds of characters, and to base its own identity and territory on those exclusions. As a result, these excluded figures negatively defined the State, and so became constitutive exclusions. One of these figures was embodied as the gender-crossing homosexual.

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<sup>6</sup> Xavier Oudin, "Household Structure and Employment Strategies in a Changing Economy," Reconfiguring Families in Contemporary Vietnam, eds. Magali Barbieri and Danièle Bélanger (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Hung Cam Thai, "The Legacy of *Doi Moi*, the Legacy of Immigration: Overseas Vietnamese Grooms Come Home to Vietnam," Reconfiguring Families in Contemporary Vietnam, eds. Magli Barbieri and Danièle Bélanger (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> The Renovation period is, arguably, dated from 1986 to 1996; the post-Renovation period from 1997 to present. See Wynn Wilcox, "In Their Image: The Vietnamese Communist Party, the 'West,' and the Social Evils Campaign of 1996," Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars 32.4 (2000), Phạm Thị Hoài, "The Machinery of Vietnamese Art and Literature in the Post-Renovation, Post-Communist, and Post-Modern Period," UCB-UCLA Consortium National Resource Center for Southeast Asia (2004).

<sup>9</sup> One could object in questioning whether a transgendered subject ought not to be considered a stable and coherent identity in itself (rather than a sign of crisis). To this objection, I have two responses. First, I am not advancing a normative claim but an argument about the meaning of homosexuality within a particular cultural context. Second, within transgender studies itself, this issue is far from settled. Gayle Salamon writes, "In a number of works theorizing transgenderism and gender dysphoria, discussions of the nature, origin, and meanings of the body have tended to treat the materiality of the body as self-evident and given...bodies whose presence is asserted as an indisputable fact and whose materiality is thought to secure both identity and subjectivity. And yet, those immaterial structures which subtend the body's materiality...cannot be accounted for within a theory that understand the body to be a plenitude of materiality and meaning" (p.3). See Gayle Salamon, Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

I base my analysis on more than 305 primary sources culled from a wide variety of cultural texts and genres found in Vietnam. The bulk of the evidence, however, derives from non-fiction books and popular newspapers. All relevant non-fiction books written in Vietnamese at the National Library in Hanoi published since Renovation were identified (1986-2008). Newspapers were also examined for coverage dating from 1986 to 2005. A range of papers were selected to ensure that the net is cast wide enough to yield both local and national coverage. They include the following: *An Ninh Thủ Đô* [Security in the Capital]; *Công An Nhân Dân* [People's Police], *Công An Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh* [Ho Chi Minh City's Police], *Nhân Dân* [The People], and *Thanh Niên* [Youth], *Tuổi Trẻ* [Age of Youth],; and *Tiền Phong* [Vanguard]. The first three are an apparatus of the Police and Army; likewise, *The People* is the venerable organ of the Communist Party. Hence, these newspapers are more likely to reflect the views of the status quo. By contrast, *Youth*, *Age of Youth* and *Vanguard*, though technically still owned by the State,<sup>10</sup> are relatively more “independent” in their choice of coverage and are considered Vietnam's most popular newspapers.<sup>11</sup> That said, the relationship between these newspapers and the State is the redflag that prompts us to exercise caution in taking them at face value. Far from being unmediated sources of evidence about the meaning of same-sex relations in this period, these newspapers raise complex issues not only about the interpretive frame through which they apprehend their objects, but also their function as instruments of what I propose is a form of disciplinary power, the particular character of which this chapter hopes to elucidate.

To grasp how representative this archive is, it is necessary to understand the distribution of the documents within and across the historical period. Of the seventy non-fiction books identified, at least twenty eight explicitly address the issue of “homosexuality”: sixteen published on or before 2005 and twelve between 2006 and 2008.<sup>12</sup> Looking at news coverage within a 20-year time span yielded a total of 277 articles.<sup>13</sup> If Renovation is defined as the years

<sup>10</sup> Nguyen Vo Thu-Huong writes: “The media enjoys various degrees of autonomy from governmental dictates, although all publicist organs are owned by units of either the government or the party...[N]ewspaper editors...**are ultimately answerable to the party's Ideological Committee**” (p.120; my emphasis). Nguyen Vo Thu-Huong, *The Ironies of Freedom: Sex, Culture, and Neoliberal Governance in Vietnam*, Critical Dialogues in Southeast Asian Studies, eds. Charles Keyes, Vincente Rafael and Laurie Sears (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> David Marr writes: “[O]ne of Vietnam's most popular newspapers, *Tuoi Tre*, invited readers to contribute to a forum...” (p.48). Marr, *Vietnamese Youth in the 1990s*.

<sup>12</sup>

Non-Fiction Books National Library	1986-1996	1996-2005	2006-2008	Total
	3	13	12	28

<sup>13</sup>

	Renovation (1986-96)	Post-Renov ( '97-'05)	No.
An Ninh Thủ Đô (Security in the Capital)	5	35	40
Công An TPHCM (Ho Chi Minh City Police)	27	34	61
Công An Nhân Dân (People's Police)	4	66	70
Tuổi Trẻ (Age of Youth)	10	30	40
Tiền Phong (Vanguard)	1	18	19
Thanh Niên (Youth)	9	38	47
Nhân Dân (The People)	0	0	0
No. of Items	56	221	277

beginning from 1986 to 1996, the vast majority of the documents were published after Renovation. We can attribute this higher density, in part, to the Social Evils campaign which began in early 1996 and picked up speed in the subsequent years.<sup>14</sup> Despite this uneven distribution, there is no significant change in the overall *thematic* substance across this historical divide—only a shift in the quantity of publications.

There is, however, a qualitative difference between the sources. Non-fiction books culled at the National Library in Hanoi comprised mostly of sex education manuals written by medical professionals and addressed to curious youth, parents and families.<sup>15</sup> In regards to newspapers, articles published by the police or security agencies were far more preoccupied with lurid crime stories, theft and murder. By contrast, popular newspapers like the *Age of Youth* (Tuổi Trẻ) and *Youth* (Thanh Niên), while still reporting on homosexual crime, published other kinds of special interest stories, including sexual health and love advice columns. It is difficult to provide exact percentages because, in any given article, several different problems could be at work simultaneously, and we cannot account for differing degrees of emphasis, connotation, allusion, implicit references, and ellipses. Thus, even though I present these numbers to glean some general trends over time, I eschew for the most part a strictly quantitative approach.<sup>16</sup> That said, having looked at these print sources in their entirety, I can still draw some general conclusions. Notably, almost all the documents begin with the implicit premise that “homosexuality”—however it is conceived—is a problematic condition. By contrast, very few believed that homosexuality was a foreign import, enacting what Jacob Aronson, perhaps influenced by Nguyen Quoc Vinh’s thesis, has called the translocation of homosexuality to some “exotic foreign place outside Vietnam” (p.206).<sup>17</sup> In fact, one can find no more than ten articles that explicitly make this rhetorical move. The majority of the documents begin instead with the belief that homosexuality is a condition to which almost anyone can be susceptible. By taking the traditional and state-sanctioned version of gender, scholars miss important features of gendered life and fail to understand that an alternative history of gender is emerging within the modern period that is bound up with ideas about homosexual susceptibility and gender inversion.

This chapter will be divided into five main sections. First, I provide the broad socio-political context for the State’s shift in governance and call for a return to “traditional” norms. Second, I locate these newspapers within the tradition of reportage and discuss the relationship between print media, sexual norms, and disciplinary power. Third, I survey the vocabulary used

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<sup>14</sup> Wilcox, "In Their Image: The Vietnamese Communist Party, the 'West,' and the Social Evils Campaign of 1996."

<sup>15</sup> Twenty two of the sources belong to this group. Four other sources are translations—of Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Elisabeth Badinter’s *XY, de l’identité masculine*, Gilbert Tordjiman’s “Sex according to society” (*Giới tính theo cuộc đời*), and an article on the history of sexuality by a Chinese writer named Dam Dai Chinh. The last two other sources include a book-length anthology of essays by Vietnamese writers entitled *Sex and the Third Sex* and a transcription of a Ho Chi Minh City radio program called the “The Purple Heart” containing frank exchanges about homosexuality.

<sup>16</sup> That is the method of a recent study by the Hanoi Academy of Journalism and Propaganda on this same topic between 2004 and 2008. By contrast, my study examines a broader stretch of time, casts a slightly wider net, and insists on a resolutely interpretive and multi-context based approach. Despite these differences, however, the Academy’s study ought to complement mine because it focuses mostly on online sources—a medium which I do not fully examine. [NoAuthor], *The Images of Homosexuals on Printed and Online Newspapers in Vietnam, 2004-2008* (Hanoi: Academy of Journalism and Propaganda and Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment (iSEE), 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Jacob Aronson, "Homosex in Hanoi? Sex, the Public Sphere, and Public Sex," *Public Sex/Gay Space*, ed. William L. Leap (New York: Columbia University, 1999).

to name “homosexuals” not only to provide a lexical key to the analysis, but also to demonstrate the persistence—indeed, social life—of a European sexological discourse. Fourth, I analyze narratives of homosexual crime and passion to elucidate the relationship between this liminal figure and the gender norms enshrined by the State. Finally, I examine letters by “homosexuals” sent to the editor to trace the psychic manifestations of the State’s disciplinary power. In each case, I underscore the centrality of gender in the exercise of power on same-sex sexuality. Ultimately, I suggest a dramatic shift in the meaning of gender in the genealogy of homosexuality in contemporary Vietnam.

### **I. The Context: Tradition, Family, and the Rhetoric of Propriety**

In 1986 the Vietnamese Communist regime embarked on a new program (Đổi Mới)—also known as Renovation. The program sought to resuscitate the national economy and to infuse a new spirit of openness. Alarmed by a lagging economy and fears of widespread hunger by its growing population, the regime adopted policies that altered agricultural means of production, welcomed foreign investment, attempted to reduce bureaucracy and curtail the one-Party’s interference with many aspects of Vietnamese life.<sup>18</sup>

This transition also meant, however, that the State had to revise its political agenda to justify its ongoing authority. Before Renovation, the State would often invoke the banner of national liberation whenever it needed to call on its people to sacrifice. This sacrifice altered men and women’s lives dramatically. According to Harriet Phinney, this sacrifice meant a shift away from interpersonal love relationships towards a devotion to the State, leading to an entire generation of unmarried and childless women.<sup>19</sup> With the advent of Renovation and the shift to a market economy, the State no longer needed individuals to sacrifice themselves in the name of revolution. As a result, the State now had to devise other governmental means of exercising its power.<sup>20</sup> One such means was to turn its gaze towards the ideals of the “happy” nuclear family.

The State created a diverse menu of popular mobilization movements to promote family values.<sup>21</sup> Through its Cultured Family Program, for instance, the State targeted issues, such as health and hygiene, population control, general social conduct and, most importantly, women’s behavior.<sup>22</sup> In reproductive family matters, the government flexed its muscle and exercised its authority, perhaps even more so during Renovation than in previous eras.<sup>23</sup> Harriet Phinney explains: “Women were the principal targets of the family planning campaigns, the focal point for the state’s efforts to produce a modern subjectivity. Women were advised when they could marry, what kind of man would be best to marry, when to bear children, and how far to space them apart. These prescriptions shape the timing and nature of family love.” She continues: “It is under the guise of helping people create and maintain happy families that the state maintains its authority through the microtechnologies of the family planning program, as well as through other

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<sup>18</sup> William Duiker, “Vietnam: The Challenge of Reform,” *Current History* 88.537 (1989).

<sup>19</sup> Harriet M. Phinney, “Objects of Affection: Vietnamese Discourses on Love and Emancipation,” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 16.2 (2008).

<sup>20</sup> Indeed, some scholars have maintained that this transition from a central command to market economy entailed a realignment of State power. See Thu-Huong, *The Ironies of Freedom: Sex, Culture, and Neoliberal Governance in Vietnam*.

<sup>21</sup> Lisa Drummond, “Mapping Modernity: Perspectives on Everyday Life in Vietnam’s Urbanizing Society,” Doctoral Dissertation Australian National University 1999.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p.81

<sup>23</sup> Catherine Scornet, “State and the Family: Reproductive Policies and Practices,” *Reconfiguring Families in Contemporary Vietnam*, eds. Magali Barbieri and Danièle Bélanger (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

programs implemented by the Women's Union" (p.348).<sup>24</sup> The Cultured Family campaign promoted, then, a rhetoric of modern propriety by encouraging, ironically, a return to traditional gender norms: "women" were thrust back to the domestic sphere and were required to demonstrate "feminine" attributes.<sup>25</sup>

By 1996, the State initiated another program entitled the Social Evils Campaign. Decree 87/CP and 88/CP issued in late 1995 aimed at "consolidating the management of cultural activities and services and promoting the bans of some serious social evils" (p.247).<sup>26</sup> The State highlighted and waged a campaign to condemn such "vices" including drugs, prostitution and pornography. The government first targeted foreign advertisements, cracked down on various forms of cultural production and then raided a variety of entertainment venues including rental stores, karaoke bars and dancing halls. Explaining the effects of this campaign on the rise of HIV infection, one sex-worker remarks, "The 'social evils' campaign just makes it worse. Now people are anxious, they have to have sex in a hurry because they are frightened of the police turning up. They don't have time to take any measures."<sup>27</sup> As a response to the Pandora's box the government itself helped unleash, this campaign partly reflected an anxiety over the erosion of the government's power and influence. "Certainly the loss of control over society," Templer explains, "troubled the Party and the government and their response was to launch the 'social evils' campaign."<sup>28</sup>

The ostensible purpose of the campaign, however, was represented differently in the English and Vietnamese media. According to Wynn Wilcox, in the English press, this campaign sought to create a "drug-free, able-bodied workforce in compliance with international anti-trafficking efforts." By contrast, the Vietnamese-language press saw the campaign as an effort to "reinvent the Vietnamese Communist Party as the gatekeeper of Vietnamese tradition."<sup>29</sup> Regardless of its ostensible purpose, the campaign in both languages sought to regulate the ideals of the body, gender and sexuality. In this sense, we can interpret the Social Evils Campaign as the counterpart to the Cultured Family Campaign. In their insistence on traditional normative ideals, both are two sides of the same coin, mutually supporting each other's rhetoric of propriety and impropriety. This brief excursion is intended to help provide the broader socio-political context for the primary documents under examination. Before we turn to such an examination, let us hone in on another critical layer of context, namely the role of the print media. The print media was arguably one of the key pedagogical resources about sexual norms available to the vast majority of the people. As some scholars have suggested, the primary source of sexual education in Vietnam during this period derives not from schools, teachers and the home but, in fact, the print media.<sup>30</sup>

## **II. The Print Media, Sexual Norms and Power**

### *News Reportages and "Democracy"*

Of the documents I shall examine, the more detailed, dense and compelling ones take the form of reportages, a genre of news writing that appeared at the turn of the twentieth-century in

<sup>24</sup> Phinney, "Objects of Affection: Vietnamese Discourses on Love and Emancipation."

<sup>25</sup> Drummond and Rydstrom, eds., *Gender Practices in Contemporary Vietnam*.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Robert Templer, *Shadows and Wind: A View of Modern Vietnam* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p.250.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p.247.

<sup>29</sup> Wilcox, "In Their Image: The Vietnamese Communist Party, the 'West,' and the Social Evils Campaign of 1996."

<sup>30</sup> Blanc, "Sex Education for Vietnamese Adolescents in the Context of the Hiv/Aids Epidemic: The Ngos, the School, the Family and the Civil Society.", Marr, *Vietnamese Youth in the 1990s*.

emerging modernities of Asia.<sup>31</sup> In his study of this genre in colonial Vietnam, Greg Lockhart has argued for the democratic potential of these modes of reportage through their usage of the modern first-person pronoun.<sup>32</sup> Whereas the “I” in the Vietnamese language, especially in family and village life, is embedded in a web of hierarchical and interpersonal relations, the “I” of these urban reportages provided the basis for a democratic politics. Explaining the usage of this pronoun in one of the reportages, Lockhart writes:

[W]ith the strong sense of family hierarchy embedded in the usual pronominal forms of address, it was one thing to converse with equals in neutral territory, and quite another to do what Tam Lang had done when he wrote ‘I Pulled a Rickshaw’: stand up before a wide audience and act as though everyone in it was of equal age and equally humble status (p.8).

Lockhart continues to describe the mass influx of migrant populations into the city; rise of the print capitalism embodied in the modern newspaper; and profound shifts in the view of literature as a mirror of “society” (as opposed to the classical view that saw literature as an embodiment of an ideal moral order). For him, these different structural changes together created the conditions that enabled people to be conceived as “equal, sovereign particles” of a larger abstract entity, such as the nation, thereby bringing about a modern “democratic revolution” (p.24; 13). Now, if we examine it carefully, Lockhart’s thesis is questionable in several respects but primarily because, as I will show, he does not consider how the reportage is implicated in forms of power. For example, it is uncertain whether these reportages actually reflect or bring about democratic belief; whether this view of the subject as “particles” enables democratic politics;<sup>33</sup> and whether one could appropriately call the colonial era “democratic.” Lockhart neither makes the case nor cites other supporting scholarship for any of these issues. But setting aside the soundness of his argument, the point is that Lockhart sees in this modern genre of reportage a positive, democratic potential because of their usage of the impersonal, non-hierarchical “I” and, more generally, thematic coverage of the life of the urban masses.

If we take the retrospective position grounded in the period of the mid-1980s, I would suggest that a re-examination of this genre becomes possible. Indeed, I would argue that we need to complicate the sanguine belief in the formal “democratic” potential of print media—understood as the “equality” implied by their inclusive representation. The issue is not simply that a significant passage of time has gone by—almost half a century—but that the subsequent political context of the country demands a re-assessment of the genre as a modern tool of disciplinary power.

*News Reportages and the Eye of Power*

The scholar, in my view, who has best captured the political context of the Renovation period is Nguyen Vo Thu-Huong. In her ambitious and perceptive study *The Ironies of Freedom*,<sup>34</sup> Thu-Huong demonstrates a dramatic contrast in the realignment of State power in the transition from socialism to market socialism. Her central argument is that whereas the State during the socialist period was the omniscient and omnipotent arbiter of all societal issues, the

<sup>31</sup> See Charles A. Laughlin, *Chinese Reportage: The Aesthetic of Historical Experience*, Asia-Pacific: Culture, Politics, and Society, eds. Rey Chow, Harry Harootunian and Masao Miyoshi (2002).

<sup>32</sup> Greg Lockhart, "First Person Narratives from the 1930s," *Light of the Capital: Three Modern Vietnamese Classics*, ed. Greg Lockhart (Oxford in Asia, 1996).

<sup>33</sup> Hannah Arendt would claim that this view could equally lead to “totalitarianism.” See her analysis on the alienated “masses.” Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1968).

<sup>34</sup> Thu-Huong, *The Ironies of Freedom: Sex, Culture, and Neoliberal Governance in Vietnam*.

period of market socialism led to the creation of a separate sphere distinct from the State, what she calls an autonomous “society.” She explains:

What I suggest is that the adoption of a market economy changed the alignment of political forces in the state and mentality of governance in Vietnam. As soon as the economy referred to market mechanisms...it followed that many saw the economy as gaining a status of relative autonomy from statist considerations (p.75).

Because the State no longer effectively claimed the perspective of omniscience, experts had to step in to fill the void. These experts came from such diverse fields as medicine, public health and criminology. Thu Huong writes, “Perpetually unfolding knowledge about the complex dynamics of the economy stood between the formerly all-knowing state and its object of knowledge and rule” (p.78). Drawing on Foucauldian and Marxist theories (and some Lacanian vocabulary), she goes on to demonstrate the differentiated modes of power that governed female prostitution during this period of market liberalization.

In regard to news reportages of this period, she demonstrates that they represent a form of disciplinary power, in part, because they position the police as criminal experts. In support of this claim, Thu-Huong marshals some of the same kinds of sources that this study shall analyze. That is, she looks at some of the same Army and Police newspapers. With the exception of *Security in the Capital* (An Ninh Thu Do), her Chapter Six on police power utilizes as evidence both the *Ho Chi Minh City's Police* (Cong An TPHCM) and *People's Police* (Cong An Nhan Dan). Identifying them as a form of disciplinary power, she explains:

The police presses demonstrated this **special knowledge** to their readership on a daily basis. Crime coverage series read like serialized crime novels where the police protagonists were locked in a race with criminal or social evil antagonists. In this narrative, police targets got ever more cunning in their disorderly pursuits. The police therefore had to constantly strive to stay one step ahead of the bad elements in terms of expertise in **detection and measures of suppression** (p.148; my emphasis).

One could also stress the fact that, as reportages, these papers function as a second pair of “eyes” for the authorities, a form of surveillance that monitors suspicious activity and that ultimately channels information up the chain of command. Explaining some of the necessary conditions of disciplinary power, Foucault writes that in addition to perpetual visibility, “[W]riting is absolutely necessary for disciplinary power to be total and continuous.” He continues, “[W]e could study the way in which, from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in the army as in schools, in centers of apprenticeship as in the police or judicial system, people’s bodies, behavior, and discourse are gradually besieged by a **tissue of writing**, by a sort of graphic plasma which **records** them, **codifies** them, and **passes them up through the hierarchy** to a centralized point” (p.48-49; my emphasis).<sup>35</sup> Likewise, as Thu-Huong has pointed out, these newspapers provide almost daily news of undercover police agents attempting to investigate, report or foil a criminal scheme. Based on my readings of these documents, I find her argument very persuasive.

I wish, nevertheless, to complicate some of the fundamental terms of Thu-Huong’s argument. This problem is illustrated in a passage where Thu-Huong shows how the police depict the cunning and deceptive tricks of prostitutes, tricks whose task it is for the police to uncover and expose. Thu-Huong then goes on to provide an example of a case of a sex-worker portrayed in a 2005 article in *The People's Police* (Cong An Nhan Dan). Thu-Huong explains: “The narrative in the article points to police interrogation and documentation as an instrument of

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<sup>35</sup> Foucault, *Psychiatric Power, Lectures at the Collège De France*.

truth discovery whereby falsehoods would start to fall away, revealing the **woman** who should become a recipient of a governmental truth.” She continues, “Such truth went beyond the work of the sex worker to her **character** in social relations. The truth came out that the parents, even her lover, had been deceived. Finally, the author cast doubt on even the sex worker’s tears as signs of her interior life externalized as a bodily symptom” (p.121; my emphasis). In this article, the question at issue is whether the young woman is truly an honest “country girl”—that is, her honest/dishonest *character*.

Yet, closer examination of the complete set of these newspapers throughout the two decades since the advent of Renovation suggests another, vital source of anxiety: the *gender identity* of the prostitute herself. Not only does the government wish to verify the honorable character of these women, it also insists on the authenticity of her gender identity *as a “woman.”* As I hope to show, this epistemology of gender will be tethered to the intractable and ambiguous figure of the gender-crossing homosexual. In these documents, I suggest, this figure will represent what Foucault once called the “margins” or “limits” of disciplinary power, the constitutive outside that is structurally necessary to shore up the boundaries of the State’s investment in certain traditional gender norms.<sup>36</sup> To support this argument, let us first turn to an examination of the cultural labels used to refer to homosexuals in this period.

### III. The Characters and “Players”: the Categories of Gender Inversion

Of the range of labels we shall survey, the term “pe-de” (or “be-de”)<sup>37</sup> represents the most enduring one in the Vietnamese cultural lexicon. Used by the overseas community, the term reportedly hails from the period of the late 1960s to mid-1970s of the now defunct South Republic of Vietnam. The term resurfaces during the Renovation period and makes perhaps its first appearance in a four-part reportage series entitled “Pede Love” (*Tình Pêđê*).<sup>38</sup> Published in 1987 by the *Ho Chi Minh City’s Police*, this reportage explains that the origin of the term “pede,” a diminutive for “pederasty,” referred to the “unnatural” relationships between a man and boy or another man. Although the phenomenon was ubiquitous under the former regime, according to this journalist, never has it been so widespread as it is now with the advent of the open-doors policy. The article then warns that this “disease” is spreading rampantly. The epidemic is complicated by the fact that one cannot distinguish between the “real” and “fake” pedes (“pêđê bị bệnh thật sự và pêđê ‘dởm’”). Whereas the real ones are truly “ill,” the fake ones simply enjoy dressing up in the opposite gender: “men who pretend to be women or women, men.” (“pêđê ‘dởm,’ nghĩa là trai mà giả gái hoặc gái mà giả trai”) (p.5).<sup>39</sup> The implication is that the overt sign of a “pede,” whether real or fake, is his or her sex role reversal or **gender inversion** within a heterosexual regime. As George Chauncey has explained in a different context, “[T]he **inverts’ desire** for men was not seen as an indication of their ‘homosexuality’ but as simply one more manifestation of their fundamentally **womanlike** character” (p.48, my

<sup>36</sup> Foucault, *Psychiatric Power, Lectures at the Collège De France*: p.53.

<sup>37</sup> Gina Masequesmay notes that, rather than being a variant of “pe-de,” the term “be-de” may have derived from the French argot “berdache” to refer to effeminate homosexuals or transvestites (p.56). Gina Masequesmay, “Becoming Queer and Vietnamese American: Negotiating Multiple Identities in an Ethnic Support Group of Lesbians, Bisexual Women and Female-to-Male Transgenders,” Doctoral Dissertation, University of California Los Angeles, 2001.

<sup>38</sup> Võ Thu Sơn, “Tình Pêđê, Phần 1 (Pêđê Love, Part 1),” *Công An Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh (Ho Chi Minh City Police)* Feb 18 1987, Võ Thu Sơn, “Tình Pêđê, Phần 2 (Pêđê Love, Part 2),” *Công An Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh (Ho Chi Minh City Police)* Dec 25 1987, Võ Thu Sơn, “Tình Pêđê, Phần 3 (Pêđê Love, Part 3),” *Công An Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh (Ho Chi Minh City Police)* Mar 4 1987, Võ Thu Sơn, “Tình Pêđê, Phần 4 (Pêđê Love, Part 4),” *Công An Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh (Ho Chi Minh City Police)* Mar 11 1987.

<sup>39</sup> Sơn, “Tình Pêđê, Phần 1 (Pêđê Love, Part 1).”

emphasis).<sup>40</sup> Likewise, during Vietnam's Renovation period, homosexuality was defined less by a distinct domain of sexuality as by one's gender: the male homosexual's practices, behaviors and desires belong more properly to those of a *woman*.

This idea is further supported by the prior article's conclusion. After explaining that the “pede” phenomenon is an illness, the author then invokes the authority of the scientific community. Noting the frequency of these ambiguous bodies in both medical and penal institutions, the writer explains that it takes an “expert” to distinguish them. He states:

Science has referred to these half-male, half-female cases as **inauthentic bisexuality (pseudo hermaphrodisme)** which would require an expert's hand to separate the authentic from the fake ones. There is no clear-cut data in our country concerning this phenomenon but recently scientists discovered that in a village in Saint Domingue the population of **inauthentic bisexuals** comprised a disproportionate number...perhaps there were 38 cases infected with the...**half-male, half-female disease**. According to some foreign news sources, in cases where doctors have affirmatively diagnosed that someone as half-male/half-female, inflicted with the bisexual ‘disease,’ the doctor can intervene by way of surgery to help the ‘victim’ return to his or her proper gender (p.5, French in original, my emphasis).<sup>41</sup>

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“Ở các cơ quan y tế hoặc ở các trại giam thỉnh thoảng vẫn gặp những trường hợp bán nam bán nữ mà khoa học gọi là hiện tượng **lưỡng tính giả (pseudo hermaphrodisme)** phải nhờ đến ‘bàn tay’ chuyên môn để kết luận đối tượng thuộc giới tính nào, xịn hay là dỏm. Ở nước ta, chưa có một thống kê rõ ràng về hiện tượng này, nhưng gần đây, các nhà khoa học phát hiện ra trong một làng Saint Domingue, những trường hợp lưỡng tính giả chiếm một tỉ lệ cao đến mức không ngờ...có đến 38 trường hợp **bị bệnh...nửa đàn ông, nửa đàn bà**. Theo một số tài liệu sách báo nước ngoài, gần đây các trường hợp bán nam bán nữ được khám nghiệm, xác định là mắc ‘bệnh’ lưỡng tính, bác sĩ có thể can thiệp bằng phẫu thuật để đưa ‘nạn nhân’ trở về với giới tính của mình một cách ‘hoàn chỉnh’ (p.5).

I have provided the passage above to show how it moves seamlessly from a notion of “pede,” understood as gender inversion, to that of “bisexuality,” understood as hermaphroditism. There is no distinction between these terms except the distinction between the “real” and “fake” homosexual whose detection requires, in any case, expert knowledge. “Bisexuality” in no way refers to the desire for one's sexual object choice, that is, for both men and women, but designates the corporeal constitution of one's gender. In this sense, the “bisexuality” of the pede refers to the fact that “he” acts much like a “she,” exhibiting a complex composite of both male and female attributes. Hence, sexuality in this context is not a separate domain of identity understood in the rhetoric of erotic object-choice. To the extent that one “has” a sexuality, it is intricately tied up with the cultural notions of gender.

Indeed, throughout the Renovation and Post-Renovation periods, the idea of “bisexuality” was often synonymous with the figure of the transgendered or hermaphrodite which was in turn the defining feature of the “homosexual.” This meaning of “bisexuality” is illustrated in another document. Published in 1992, the article “A man gives birth” reported on the case of a Philipino hermaphrodite who was six months pregnant and, apparently, under the watch of the World Health Organization since 1985. The article states:

<sup>40</sup> Jr. George Chauncey, *Gay New York* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

<sup>41</sup> Sơn, “Tình Pêđê, Phần 1 (Pédé Love, Part 1).”

Carlo is a man from the Philippines who is pregnant and hopes to give birth in the next month after surgery to his uterus. Doctors state that this 32 year old man has been pregnant for six months. This man is of the **lưỡng tính** [hermaphrodite? bisexual?] type, with a set of both sexual organs intact.<sup>42</sup>

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Carlo một người đàn ông ở Philippines đã có chửa từ lâu và hy vọng ông sẽ đẻ vào tháng tới sau lần phẫu thuật tử cung. Người đàn ông 32 tuổi, làm y tá, mà bác sĩ nói ông đã có bầu cách nay 6 tháng. Ông này thuộc dạng **lưỡng tính**, có đủ cả 2 cơ quan sinh dục.

Although the report was taken from a foreign news sources, the vocabulary used in this piece reveals something of the historical character of the local lexicon. On the basis of the passage's context, the term *lưỡng tính* is best translated to mean either "transgendered" or "hermaphroditic." In fact, the latter meaning is what the Institute of Linguistics provides in its *Vietnamese-English Dictionary* first published in 1987: *lưỡng tính* is listed as "hermaphrodite" (p.448)<sup>43</sup>—not "bisexual" as it is now translated and understood to mean. This older meaning of the term is consistent with its usage in the prior document.

To help bring this point into sharp relief, consider the changing definition of the word itself. A recent dictionary published in 2004 by the World Publishing House, long known for its translation of foreign works, translates the term *lưỡng tính* as "bisexual; ambisexual."<sup>44</sup> This is also the translation provided by some of the medical and sex manuals that I consulted for this study. For example, one manual published in 2005 explains the term bisexual as "people who have sexual and emotional needs from both sexes" ("đó là người có nhu cầu quan hệ tình cảm và nhu cầu sinh lý với cả hai giới")(p.102).<sup>45</sup> Notably, the manual cites this phenomenon among countryside folk, bisexual married men and women who are more colloquially referred to as *đa hệ*--that is, "polyamorous" or "having multiple relations" (p.102). If this description is true, then this practice would dispel the Renovation myth of the nuclear family as the primordial unit hailing from time immemorial, pointing instead to alternative, more complex forms of kinship. At any rate, the World Publishing's House's definition of "bisexuality" is consistent with the contemporary paradigm according to which one's sexuality is defined by one's object choice, reflecting perhaps the global movement of cultural flows, ideas and practices. Nevertheless, this current definition of the term fails to capture the profound semantic shift in the meaning of same-sex sexuality. I belabor this point because, in the historical period under examination, this discourse of gender inversion will persist as the dominant view of homosexuality in Vietnamese language sources.

Like the discourse of "pe-de," the terms used for lesbian sexuality exhibits a strikingly parallel trajectory. "O-Môi" [pronounced "Oh-Moy"] is purportedly derived from the name of a tropical fruit in Vietnam. Due to the way it is consumed, it is also the informal Vietnamese argot for "lesbian." Others believe, however, that the term has nothing to do with a tropical fruit but

<sup>42</sup> PV, "Một Người Đàn Ông Đẻ (a Man Gives Birth)," *Công An Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh (Ho Chi Minh City Police)* Jun 3 1992.

<sup>43</sup> "Lưỡng Tính," *Từ Điển Việt-Anh (Vietnamese-English Dictionary)*, eds. Đặng Chấn Liêu, Lê Khả Kế and Phạm Duy Trọng (Ho Chi Minh: Nhà Xuất Bản Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh (Ho Chi Minh Publishing House), 2000 [1987]), vol. 1, 1 vols.

<sup>44</sup> Bùi Phụng, "Lưỡng Tính," *Từ Điển Việt Anh (Vietnamese English Dictionary)* (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Thế Giới (World Publishing House), 2004), vol. 1, 1 vols.

<sup>45</sup> Hà Hoài Dung, ed., *Kiến Thức Về Tình Yêu Và Giới Tính (Knowledge About Love and Gender)* (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Từ Điển Bách Khoa (The Science Dictionary Publishing House), 2005).

represents a diminutive of the French term “homosexuelle.”<sup>46</sup> Whatever its origin, the term “O-Môi” traveled with the overseas community and was later appropriated as the name of a southern California ethnic support group of lesbians, bisexuals, and female-to-male transgenders.<sup>47</sup> Like “pede,” the term “o-moi” also remained in circulation in the Saigonese Renovation press. One article explains that while these “gangs” of lesbians appear perfectly “feminine” at birth, they later come to look increasingly masculine, and at times, even more mannish than men themselves. The writer explains:

When their parents bore them, these young women exhibited all the feminine attributes of the female sex. But as they grew up, they enjoyed wearing men’s clothes, displaying men’s behaviors and mannerisms, enjoyed befriending and courting other women to be their girlfriends so that they could love each other just like boyfriends and girlfriends. In order to distinguish the word ‘pede’ which refers to male homosexuality, people called these types ‘o-moi,’ that is, female homosexuality (p.4).<sup>48</sup>

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Khi cha mẹ sinh ra, số thiếu nữ này có đầy đủ đặc điểm, giới tính của phái nữ. Nhưng khi lớn lên họ thích mặc đồ con trai, có những tác phong cử chỉ như con trai, thích làm quen tán tỉnh các cô gái khác để căn bô, để yêu đương như con trai với con gái. Để phân biệt với chữ ‘pêđê’ chỉ đồng tính luyến ái nam, người ta gọi những người này là ‘ô môi,’ tức đồng tính ái nữ.”

Just as the term “pede” is embodied in the effeminate cross-dressing male homosexual, so the term “o-môi” refers to one kind of lesbian sexuality and gender identification. I say “one” kind because, needless to say, there can be a broad spectrum. Yet, in the dominant press, the definition of a lesbian in no way adheres to what Esther Newton has wryly called the “first” principle of lesbian feminism: “woman-identified woman” (p.281).<sup>49</sup> Rather, according to these documents, the “o-moi” is a woman whose sex, gender, practice and desire ought to belong more properly to those of a man. Consider, for example, the rhetoric that a recent document deploys in describing this population. “In the World of the O-Môi,” a reportage published in 2005, we observe the recurrence of the topos of authenticity: “People refer to female homosexuality as ‘o-môi’. There are the real *o-môi* and there are the...fakes ones.”<sup>50</sup> The writer continues, “The world of the *o-môi* is fairly complex with constant changes in psycho-physiology” (p.6).<sup>51</sup> Whereas the “real” ones exhibit “congenital” (“bẩm sinh”) bodily features resembling that of a man, the “fake” ones merely enjoy behaving and dressing like one. In describing this phenomenon, the article supplies an illuminating first-hand account of an *o-môi*. S/he explains:

<sup>46</sup>Như Lịch, "Trong Thế Giới Ô Môi (in the World of The "Tamarind" [Lesbian])," Thanh Niên (The Youth) Apr 4 2005.

<sup>47</sup> Gina states that this “slang term was popularly used to refer to lesbians in the late 1960s to mid-1970s in Saigon, now Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. About twenty years after the fall of Saigon and the mass exodus of Vietnamese to the U.S., term ‘o-môi’ re-emerged as the name for a newly found support network of Vietnamese lesbians, bisexual women, and female-to-male transgenders” (p.56). Masequesmay, "Becoming Queer and Vietnamese American: Negotiating Multiple Identities in an Ethnic Support Group of Lesbians, Bisexual Women and Female-to-Male Transgenders."

<sup>48</sup> Lan Anh, "Chuyện Tình Ô-Mai (a Lesbian Love Affair)" Công An Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh (Ho Chi Minh City Police) Apr 11 1990.

<sup>49</sup> Newton, "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman."

<sup>50</sup> Lịch, "Trong Thế Giới Ô Môi (in the World of The "Tamarind" [Lesbian])."

<sup>51</sup> The original quotation: “Người ta gọi những người đồng tính luyến ái nữ là ‘ô-môi.’ Có những ‘ô-môi’ thật, có những ‘ô-môi’...giả. Thế giới của các ‘ô-môi’ khá phức tạp với những đổi thay thất thường về tâm sinh lý...” (p.6).

Since I was growing up, I had always felt that I was not normal like most other girls. Even though everyone considered me a girl, in my own mind, I always thought I was a boy! In the countryside, I was afraid of the gossip, so I was always ‘acting’ the role of someone else. Here [in Ho Chi Minh City], nobody knows anyone and so I can live as I truly wish.<sup>52</sup>

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Từ lúc mới lớn, tui đã cảm nhận mình không bình thường như những bạn gái khác. Mặc dù ai cũng coi tui là con gái, nhưng trong thân tâm, tui luôn nghĩ mình là con trai! Ở quê, sợ mọi người bàn tán nên tui luôn phải ‘đóng vai’ một người khác. Còn ở đây, chẳng ai biết ai nên tui được sống thực với những gì mình muốn (p.6).

By the standards of the dominant culture, the prior speaker represents one of the so-called “fake” *o-môi*’s insofar as she appears to lack overt male bodily features. In an attempt to classify her in/authenticity, the article goes on to describe several other cases of “female homosexuality,” primarily those of women from the countryside who migrate to the city. Perhaps in another study, it would be interesting to examine whether there is a correlation between local notions of homosexuality and socioeconomic status, much the same way that George Chauncey discovered a notion of gender inversion in New York’s working class subculture at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>53</sup> If Chauncey’s thesis can be adapted to other geo-temporal contexts, might the growing migration of poor workers to the urban centers in this period of Vietnam’s explosive economic development explain the existence of this notion of gender-inversion? Does the rise of the bourgeois public sphere coincide with the disaggregation of sexuality from gender? At any rate, the example of the *o-môi* above shows how, within the terms of the dominant culture, “she” ought to be a “he”—and a “fake” one at that. Hence, even as late as 2005, the discourse of gender inversion (or sex-role reversal) still powerfully governed the public understanding of homosexuality.

Besides “pede” and “o-moi,” there are at least two other prevalent terms used to describe homosexuality. The first is “female contaminated shadow” (*bóng lại cái*) or simply “shadow” (*bóng*) commonly used in reference to homosexual men. This term first appeared in the French colonial period but, as I discussed in a previous chapter, its meaning bore no relation to same-sex sexuality. In this study, the first source that I found employing this term appears as early as 1987 in the “Pede Love” reportage series,<sup>54</sup> whose writer suggests that the term, in fact, can be traced to the former southern regime: “[T]he phenomenon of ‘homosexuality,’ half-male/half-female, **shadow**, pe-dê also existed in the former regime...” (p.5; my emphasis).<sup>55</sup> This expression parallels its other sister names in referring to the gender of the homosexual. As another article<sup>56</sup> explains, these “shadows” can be divided into two groups: the “open” (*bóng lộ*) and “closed” (*bóng kín*) ones. Whereas the “closed ones” appear masculine on the outside, they are actually “weak” on the inside—“just like a woman.”<sup>57</sup> By contrast, the “open shadows” are presumably woman-like throughout. “Shadow” is also the title of a recent homosexual autobiography<sup>58</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York*.

<sup>54</sup> Son, “Tình Pêdê, Phần 1 (Pêdê Love, Part 1).”

<sup>55</sup> The original quotation: “Và hiện tượng ‘đồng tính luyến ái’, ái nam ái nữ, bóng, pê-dê v.v. ở chế độ cũ cùng có...”

<sup>56</sup> Andy Trương, “Vâng, Tôi Là Gay Đây (Yes, I Am Gay),” *Tiền Phong (Vanguard)* July 21 1998.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. The original quotation: “‘bóng kín’... nghĩa là có vẻ ngoài đầy chất nam tính hết sức kín đáo nhưng bên trong là tính yếu ớt của một người đàn bà” (p.8).

<sup>58</sup> Nguyễn and Trang, *Bóng: Tư Truyện Của Một Người Đồng Tính [Shadow: Stories Told by a Homosexual]*.

published in Hanoi and the name of the supposedly first play about this subject in the overseas community—dramatized in Little Saigon, Westminster, California on October 3, 2009. “When the Shadows Assume a Figure” (Khi Bóng Đã Say Hình) was written and directed by Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc, a renowned Saigonese playwright who, having married at a mature age to an American, came to live a double life in both countries. In the advertisement for the drama,<sup>59</sup> the narrator states that the play is the first overseas production about the “third sex” (or “third gender”). The “third sex” (“giới tính thứ ba”) by which is meant a woman “trapped” in a man’s body (or vice versa) is the other prevalent term for homosexuality.<sup>60</sup> Both terms—“shadow” and the “third sex”—are used interchangeably. They acquired cultural currency in the Post-Renovation period in May of 2005 when the State passed a law permitting sex-change operations.<sup>61</sup>

Finally, the words “gay” and “lesbian” seem to lack cultural traction. They do surface now and then and perhaps increasingly so today. But within the historical period under examination (1986 to 2005), their usage is in competition with a range of other discourses that have longer and more complex histories. The evidence bears out this point. Among the news sources culled, the first article to invoke the word “gay” was published in 1997.<sup>62</sup> Since then, there had been only a dozen articles, more or less, that used this term. Of the non-fiction books garnered, the earliest publication that touched on homosexuality appeared in 1992 but makes no use of these terms whatsoever; instead, the writer employs the formal term “homosexuality” (đồng tính luyến ái).<sup>63</sup> The first book that I found using the phrase “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered” was published—believe it or not—in 2001.<sup>64</sup> Hence, within the time frame of this study, the vocabulary of “gay” and “lesbian” lacked popular usage. In retrospect, this outcome is not surprising given that these terms themselves were relatively recent products within U.S. history<sup>65</sup> and that their emergence as a set of global discourses<sup>66</sup> would not have reached Vietnam directly prior to the two country’s economic and political normalization in 1995.

Yet, even in those cases where the term “gay” has entered the culture, it tends to lose fidelity to its original meaning. In its movement through the time and space, the term becomes transformed and localized adopting a new set of designations. Consider, for example, a reportage written by a group of journalist for the *People’s Police* [Cong An Nhan Dan]. These reporters went undercover to investigate and write on the underground subculture of “gay Hanoi.” In their

<sup>59</sup> < <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lnbJSk8pxw0> >

<sup>60</sup> Among the print sources examined for this study, the term the “third sex” was first used in 2004. See Đào Trung Uyên, Anonymous and LTHP, “Chia Sẻ Của Người Ngoài Cuộc (the Confidences of Outsiders),” *Tuổi Trẻ (Youth)* May 15 2004.

<sup>61</sup> VH Quỳnh and NV Hải, “Công Nhận Quyền Hiến Xác, Quyền Xác Định Lại Giới Tính (Accepting the Right to Determine One’s Gender),” *Tuổi Trẻ (Youth)* May 20 2005.

<sup>62</sup> Cù Mai Công, “Những Sàn Nhảy Đặc Biệt (Special Kinds of Dance Floors),” *Tuổi Trẻ (Youth)* Nov 8 1997.

<sup>63</sup> M.D. Trương Ngọc Hôn, “Người Con Trai Cần Biết (What Boys Need to Know),” (Ho Chi Minh: Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ (Youth Publishing House), 1992).

<sup>64</sup> Anphong Nguyễn Công Vinh, “Đồng Tính Luyến Ái Là Gì? (What Is Homosexuality?)” *Giải Đáp Thắc Mắc Về Giới Tính (Answers to Questions About Gender)* (Ho Chi Minh Nhà Xuất Bản Tôn Giáo (The Religion Publishing House), 2001).

<sup>65</sup> See the entry for “gay” in Scott Speirs, “Gay,” *Gay Histories and Cultures: An Encyclopedia*, ed. George E. Haggerty, vol. 2 (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000). Also, pages 12-23 in George Chauncey, *Gay New York*.

<sup>66</sup> Dennis Altman, “Rupture or Continuity? The Internationalization of Gay Identities,” *Post-Colonial, Queer*, ed. John C. Hawley (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001).

report, they describe a world in which they cannot distinguish between man or woman: “The bodily figure and voice of a woman but the countenance of a man, the strange mix that some people have called ‘gay’” (p.8).<sup>67</sup> Here “gay” is less a reference to a distinct domain of sexuality as the name for one’s ambiguous gender to which sexuality is nevertheless constitutive. In other words, like the terms “pe-de,” “third gender,” or “female contaminated shadow,” the meaning of “gay” now designates a domain of gender identity, much like what George Chauncey identified in working-class urban America at the turn of the twentieth-century.

As another example, consider also the reception in Vietnam of the U.S. movie *Boys Don’t Cry*. This film recounts the tragic life of the transgendered Brandon Teena, the subject of much critical scholarship in recent years. The attention has generally centered on the complex ways in which Brandon Teena’s body is crudely categorized, effaced and with horrific violence on the psyche of the subject in question.<sup>68</sup> Our purpose here, of course, is not to perpetuate this cycle of violence but, like other queer scholars, trace how certain communities have read Brandon Teena and, in so doing, attempt to understand the norms of that community. In the article “Hollywood does not like gays?”<sup>69</sup> a Vietnamese journalist surveys a number of what he considers “gay” films including *Silence of the Lambs*, *Philadelphia*, and *Boys Don’t Cry*. After looking at pejorative representations of “gay” characters, the writer then turns to a discussion about the last of these films. The writer states:

But the work that has received the most applause is the film *Boys Don’t Cry*... This film revolves around the life of Teena Brandon—a 21 year old young woman who is **inflicted with being ‘gay’**... Admittedly, however, the film does depict another fatal ending to the life of another ‘gay’ character—Teena—who sinks to the dregs of society before turning over a new leaf and dies tragically by the gunshot of a gang of dishonest folks (p.6, my emphasis).<sup>70</sup>

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“Nhưng nhân văn và được ca ngợi nhiều nhất vẫn là phim *Boys Don’t Cry*... Phim nói về Teena Brandon – cô gái 21 tuổi **bị ‘gay.’**... Tuy nhiên một lần nữa số phận của một nhân vật ‘gay’ –Teena—bị chìm xuống tận đáy của xã hội trước khi trở về ‘hoàn lương’ rồi chết thê thảm trước họng súng của bọn bất lương (p.6).

As many speakers of Vietnamese are well aware, there are several grammatical ways to assign value to an action, what Laurence C. Thompson has called the “logical passive expressions.”<sup>71</sup> One way to do so is to attach to any verb the descriptive complement “bị” which means to “suffer, undergo, be affected by some action, state or factor” (p.228).<sup>72</sup> For example, if I wanted to say that I was invited to go to the movies but meant that this was bad news, I would simply attach the descriptive complement “bị” to the verb. In the prior passage, the journalist attaches this complement to the word “gay,” thereby implying that the condition of “gayness” has befallen “Teena Brandon.” In this case, the writer subsumes the transgendered body of Brandon Teena under the label “gay” and, in so doing, reveals something of the ways in which the

<sup>67</sup> [Group of Reporters] Nhóm Phóng Viên, “Dở Khóc, Dở Cười (Half Crying, Half Smiling)” Công An Nhân Dân July 14 2005.

<sup>68</sup> See Halberstam’s “Chapter 2: The Brandon Archive.” Halberstam, In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives.

<sup>69</sup> SH, “Hollywood Không Ưa “Gay”? (Hollywood Does Not Like “Gays?”),” Tiền Phong (Vanguard) Apr 1 2002.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> See Section 9.64 in Laurence C. Thompson, A Vietnamese Reference Grammar (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1987).

<sup>72</sup> Thompson, A Vietnamese Reference Grammar.

dominant culture understands same-sex sexuality. Whereas the term “gay” in the English-speaking world generally implies a specific form of sexuality,<sup>73</sup> for the prior writer, this term traverses multiple modalities of subjecthood that are nevertheless encapsulated in the single word—“gay”—by which the writer understands to mean “homosexual.” But if Brandon Teena is read as “homosexual” when s/he is, in fact, transgendered, then “homosexuality” in this context encompasses both gender *and* sexuality. More precisely, the transgendered body—the “bisexuality” of Brandon Teena—is the marker of gay-ness, and by extension, homosexuality. Hence, to the extent that the American meaning of “gay” refers to one’s sexuality, in Vietnam it comes to embody the gender transitivity of homosexuality.

Although the evidence I have offered thus far is by no means comprehensive,<sup>74</sup> it does provide a general overview and lexical key to the documents ahead. It also demonstrates how a nineteenth-century European sexological discourse has somehow survived in the Vietnamese one throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In another study, perhaps it would be worthwhile investigating the genealogy of this discourse by going back to the Communist period and that of the former South Republic of Vietnam. As an exemplary moment of this body of evidence, however, I would like to turn to a memoir by a young local queer author. In *Not Alone in a Strange Land* (Không Lạc Loài),<sup>75</sup> Phạm Thanh Trung recounts his trials and tribulations living in Hanoi’s queer subcultural life through the eighties and nineties. Reflecting on the episode when his father discovered his son’s queerness, the author notes, “But when he discovered that I loved and entered into relationships only with men, all those dreams of his suddenly collapsed.” Trung continues, “In reality, he was unable to overcome the prejudices that society at large had singled out for homosexuals in such contemptuous terms it had created for them, such as: ‘pe-dê’, ‘shadow’, ‘hermaphrodite’ (At that time, the term ‘gay’ was not yet in common usage)” (p.105).<sup>76</sup> In this passage, Trung does not mention the lesbian term *o-môi* or the more recent coinage, the “third sex.” Despite these omissions, he nonetheless helps distill—and further substantiate—the contention that the culture’s perception of the homosexual is filtered predominately through terms that index the centrality of gender to the cultural construction of homosexuality. This particular understanding of homosexuality is not in itself pernicious. Yet, as Trung indicates, these terms are far from neutral denominations, serving rather as pregnant signifiers conveying social contempt (*đầy miệt thị*).

#### IV. Tales of Homosexual Crime and Passion

As I explained previously, in Vietnam’s transition from a central command to market economy, the State retreated from managing many aspects of Vietnamese life by shifting the burden of social welfare to the family unit, a shift that signals what for some scholars was a period of neoliberal market dominance.<sup>77</sup> Within this context, the bourgeois nuclear family both

<sup>73</sup>The article in question was published in 2002, so we are in the right ballpark. The online *Oxford English Dictionary* (2009) substantiates this historical point in subcategory (d) of its chronology of this term.

<sup>74</sup>For an extended list of the argot based on ethnographic research, see Duc Anh Ngo, Michale W. Ross, Ha Phan, Eric A. Ratliff, Thang Trinh and Lisa Sherburne, “Male Homosexual Identities, Relationships, and Practices among Young Men Who Have Sex with Men in Vietnam: Implications for Hiv Prevention,” *AIDS Education and Prevention* 21.3 (2009).

<sup>75</sup>Phạm Thành Trung, *Không Lạc Loài (Not Alone in a Strange Land)* (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Hội Nhà Văn (The Writers Association Publishing House), 2009).

<sup>76</sup>Ibid. The original quotation: “Nhưng khi biết tôi chỉ yêu và quan hệ với đàn ông, thì tất cả những mơ ước đó sụp đổ. Nói đúng ra, ông không vượt qua nổi những kỳ thị mà thiên hạ đã dành cho những người đồng tính thông qua những danh từ đầy miệt thị như: ‘Pê dê’, ‘bóng’, ‘ái’ (Hồi đó từ ‘gay’ còn chưa phổ biến)” (p.105).

<sup>77</sup>Thu-Huong, *The Ironies of Freedom: Sex, Culture, and Neoliberal Governance in Vietnam*.

benefitted and suffered from the market. They benefitted insofar as they succeeded in being *homo oeconomicus*, implementing effectively a cost/benefit analysis, gathering their collective resources and using them in a manner that will produce a net profit. In such a system, woe is s/he who miscalculates, lacks capital or a support network, or who faces catastrophic accidents without health insurance. As Wendy Brown explains, neoliberalism establishes laws, institutions and policies in such a way that they reduce the question of human value to a “calculus of utility, benefit or satisfaction against a microeconomic grid of scarcity, supply and demand, and moral value-neutrality” (p.40).<sup>78</sup> Of course, one could question neoliberalism’s self-proclaimed “neutrality,” not only because “neutrality” itself can be a form of value, but also because such an economic calculus can be mobilized to justify the most dubious of projects: the waging of war, building of offshore prisons, the use of torture. In Vietnam, however, while the State certainly encouraged market rationality, it also saturated the public with propaganda about family values and “social evils.” To the State, the introduction of the open market signaled the spawning of all sorts of vices both old and new that threatened the integrity of the mythic traditional family. Lurking in every nook and cranny, these “evils” were depicted as leading ordinary men and women, wholesome husbands and wives, astray. Of the putative vices unleashed by this Pandora’s box, homosexuality represented one conspicuous incarnation.

### **Deceptive Prostitutes**

One core group of documents recounts the narrative of the homosexual as a deceptive prostitute. Like the names used to refer to homosexuals, these documents display a heightened fixation over the prostitute’s gender. The male homosexual, dressed as a woman, is portrayed as beguiling his “innocent” clients. The clients, usually straight men, are portrayed as artless consumers who have received “fake goods.” Let us look at a typical narrative.

In an article entitled “A Flower Seeks Clients,”<sup>79</sup> the homodiegetic narrator “Mr. H” rides his bicycle through the parks of Hanoi one summer evening. He bumps into a young woman and asks her for directions. She glances “coquettishly” (*lúng liếng*) at him, and the two decide to head to a dark corner. Before they exchange “confidences” (*tâm sự*), the man hands her a sum of money. No sooner does she accept the cash than she runs off without having delivered the “goods” (“hàng hóa”). He chases after her only to find rubber garters falling from her breasts. The man pauses and stands “transfixed” and “stupefied” (“sững sờ”; “lặng người”). At this point, the diegesis also stops. Like a government health advisory, the authorial narrator intervenes to warn his audiences to beware of young male “pêdês” or homosexuals who dress up as “fake women” and “fake prostitutes” (“đồng giả phụ nữ và làm giả nghề ‘mại dâm’”). As another article asks, “Why do they dress up as women? Yes! They are sick people carrying in their body the illness of homosexuality” (“Tại sao chúng lại đồng giả đàn bà? Vâng! Họ là những người bệnh hột mang trong mình căn bệnh đồng tính luyến ái”).<sup>80</sup>

At issue here is the rhetorical style in which these narratives are written and the way it conducts an ideology of sexuality and gender. We are less interested in debating the empirical facts of the matter which would, in any case, be outside the scope of our project; rather, the issues in dispute are the ideological maneuvers of the text, the kinds of values it advances, and

<sup>78</sup> Wendy Brown, “Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy,” *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>79</sup> Tuyên, Quách. “Hoa Tìm Khách (A Flower Seeks Clients).” *An Ninh Thủ Đô (Security in the Capital)* May 27, 1990: 3.

<sup>80</sup> Nguyễn Thái Thăng Long, “Những Cô Gái Bán Hoa Rôm (Girls Who Sell Fake Flowers)” *An Ninh Thủ Đô (Security in the Capital)* Jan 20 1997.

human possibilities it promotes. In the prior article, why is the emphasis on the marked body of the prostitute and homosexual? Why is the headline not: “Heterosexual man purchases sex in the park”? Hence, the rhetoric of the text is as equally important as the empirical evidence itself in examining the ideology of this period and, therefore, deserves our careful attention. In this case, the narrative focuses on the interest of the client, perhaps consistent with the emerging ideology of the market. The periodical does not warn its implied male audience to obey the law and avoid purchasing sex, as one might expect from the Police and Army; the article functions instead much like a consumer report. In these reports, the anxiety follows not from the sexual act or stolen valuables so much as from the prostitute’s gender. The cross-dresser enacts her female role so well that “innocent” men are falling prey to false advertising. As the title of another article makes clear, these prostitutes are selling “fake flowers,”<sup>81</sup> a euphemism for their sex. The climax of these narratives usually takes place when the male client stands frozen-- “stunned” upon learning that he has been “duped” by a “fake” prostitute. The figure of the fake prostitute, in turn, is repeatedly associated with the “homosexual” as if both are one and the same.

This fixation over the ambiguous body of the homosexual is further dramatized in the fictional detective-thriller, “The Crime that does not Wear a Woman’s Face.”<sup>82</sup> Serialized for six months from March to August of 1990, this twenty-one part story opens with a dead female prostitute lying on a table.<sup>83</sup> Doctors, nurses, and the police surround the corpse that is covered over by a blanket. As one of the nurses unveils the corpse, everyone is struck with bewilderment. Another nurse remarks, “Perhaps a pede?” (“Chắc là pê đê?”). Another cries out, “A woman but with...guns!” (“Đàn bà nhưng có...súng!”).<sup>84</sup> Needless to say, “guns” here is used as a euphemism for the male sexual organs. It is not entirely clear why the body in question is considered a “woman;” perhaps the nurse’s judgment was based on a prior expectation or on the presence of certain bodily features; or perhaps the victim is a hermaphrodite. Whatever the case, the story leaves the gender identity of the corpse a mystery and as a leitmotif. Forensic scientists are called in, charged with the task of determining the body’s true sex which, in the context of the story, is presumed to be aligned if not synonymous with gender. As a work of fiction, this serialized novella allegorizes the perceived inscrutability of the homosexual and his gender-ambiguous body.

Finally, as one last example, in another article, the reader is introduced to the “tricks” deployed by this growing population of “pedes.” In the center is a picture of two young men sitting at the police station accused of “pretending” to dress as women. The article begins with a familiar narrative: You are taking a leisurely stroll in the park and decide to rest your feet on some stone benches. You see some attractive young ladies approaching you. “If you are fawn that cannot tell the difference between a real and fake ‘lady,’” the narrator warns, “who knows what the night will hold for you?” The narrator continues: “Maybe you will escape her trap, or perhaps you will have gone nowhere before finding that your wrist watch has been snatched, your wallet missing, your bicycle gone” (p.5).<sup>85</sup> The point of the story cannot simply be to alert

<sup>81</sup> Long, “Những Cô Gái Bán Hoa Rôm (Girls Who Sell Fake Flowers) ”.

<sup>82</sup> Huỳnh, Nguyễn. “Tôi Ác Không Mang Khuôn Mặt Đàn Bà, Phần 1 (The Crime That Does Not Wear a Woman's Face, Part 1).” *Công An Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh (Ho Chi Minh City Police)* Mar 21. 1990: 7

<sup>83</sup> Huỳnh, Nguyễn. “Tôi Ác Không Mang Khuôn Mặt Đàn Bà, Phần 2 (The Crime That Does Not Wear a Woman's Face, Part 2).” *Công An Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh (Ho Chi Minh City Police)* Mar 28. 1990: 7.

<sup>84</sup> Huỳnh, Nguyễn. “Tôi Ác Không Mang Khuôn Mặt Đàn Bà, Phần 3 (The Crime That Does Not Wear a Woman's Face, Part 3).” *Công An Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh (Ho Chi Minh City Police)* April 4. 1990: 7.

<sup>85</sup> The original quotation: “Ở Công viên Quách Thị Trang, công viên trước rạp Bến Thành, công viên trước nhà hát thành phố, dọc các công viên bên, tàu khi bạn tha thân dạo chơi tình cờ ngồi xuống một ghế đá nghĩ chân. Lập tức

readers of this impending social disease and to warn straight men to keep up their guard. Rather, the article also implies that the “fawn” must learn how to be far more experienced in sexual matters. Like a vigilant consumer, he must now be able to distinguish between the real and fake goods. And this article—along with the many others that grew explosively during this period—would instruct him on how best to discern this nascent and emerging character, notorious for his or her sexual inscrutability: the homosexual prostitute.

### Cunning Thieves

Another core group of documents center on the representation of the cross-dressing homosexual as cunning thief. The main conflict in these reports tends to revolve around the homosexual who “deceives” his victims and steals their belongings or property. One example of this kind of narrative, published in early Renovation, portrays a subculture of homosexuals who gather at Saigon’s public funerals and weddings. In certain urban circles, the commemoration of the dead was apparently characterised not by solemn silence, but blaring music and boisterous entertainment. Christophe Robert makes the following observation in his ethnographic account: “the ebullient tone, fostered in part by the large quantities of beer and rice alcohol consumed by the men, is in sharp contrast with the cold, distant, secular rituals of the state and the sublime awe towards the national sacred that they aim to instill” (p.60).<sup>86</sup> In the “Pédé Love” series, for example, the reporter describes a group of *pê-dês* who voluntarily provide entertainment at these ceremonies.<sup>87</sup> Likewise, the *ô-môis* were also known to have participated. As one journalist notes, “Whenever they saw a wedding or funeral ceremony, these gangs of ‘*ô-moi*’ would join and help with the festivities without asking for any remuneration” (p.4).<sup>88</sup> This practice is apparently prevalent in the Mekong Delta and widely known by both locals and the media.<sup>89</sup> It is alluded to in the memoir *Not Alone in a Strange Land* when the protagonist describes his first experience living in “free-wheeling” Saigon. He writes, “In addition, there is also a very peculiar local custom at many of the funeral ceremonies where homosexuals dress up in women’s clothes, pump their breasts.” He continues, “They come to sing and dance in quite a fashionable manner. A stranger from afar like myself would mistaken these gatherings for weddings” (p.147).<sup>90</sup> In particular, some of these male *pê-dês* entertain the crowd by singing about their fate: “My life is a *pê-dê*, so I am always alone, regardless of whom I love! I am a *pê-dê*, so no love can ever form...” (“Đời tôi *pê-dê* nên yêu ái cũng cô đơn! Đời tôi *pê-dê* nên yêu ái cũng không thành...”) (p.4).<sup>91</sup> At these ceremonies, the *ô-môis* are likewise known

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dưới ánh đèn ngồi quanh, bắt chuyện, hỏi thăm ‘tình hình thế giới’ ngay. Nếu bạn là một nai tơ, nhìn ‘nàng’ thiết cũng giống như ‘nàng’ giả thì ai biết con đường đêm đó dẫn bạn đi tới đâu? Có khi thoát khỏi cái bẫy của ‘nàng’ hoặc chưa đi tới đâu hết, bạn sẽ bị lột cái đồng hồ đeo tay, bị rút cái bóp tiền, bị cuỗm mất chiếc xe đạp, chiếc xe hon đa v.v.” (p.5). Sơn, “Tình Pêđê, Phần 4 (Pédé Love, Part 4).”

<sup>86</sup> Christophe Robert, “Social Evils’ and the Question of Youth in Post-War Saigon,” Doctoral Dissertation, Cornell University, 2005.

<sup>87</sup> Sơn, “Tình Pêđê, Phần 2 (Pédé Love, Part 2).”

<sup>88</sup> Anh, “Chuyện Tình Ô-Mai (a Lesbian Love Affair)”. The original quotation: “Hễ thấy chỗ nào có đám cưới hoặc đám ma là băng ‘ô môi’ liền tìm đến để hát hò giúp vui không cần thù lao bồi dưỡng” (p.4).

<sup>89</sup> The reporter states, “Sometimes these *pê-dê* gangs...perform as far as Tay Ninh, Ba Rịa, Tien Giang [Regions in the Mekong Delta and the South].” (“Có khi các băng *pê-dê* này...lưu diễn ở tận Tây Ninh, Bà Rịa, Tiền Giang” (p.5). Sơn, “Tình Pêđê, Phần 3 (Pédé Love, Part 3).”

<sup>90</sup> The original quotation: “Ngoài ra còn có một tập quán khá lạ ở nhiều đám ma, xuất hiện một đám những người đồng tính cải trang thành phụ nữ với những bộ ngực được bơm căng...Họ tới ca hát múa may rất xôm tụ. Đám ma ở đây lại kéo dài đến mấy ngày. Người lạ như tôi đi từ xa lại cứ tưởng đám cưới” (p.147). Trung, Không Lạc Loài (Not Alone in a Strange Land).

<sup>91</sup> Sơn, “Tình Pêđê, Phần 1 (Pédé Love, Part 1).”

for singing a piece called “The Shadows” in reference to the subcultural lives that they live. The song was originally made famous by the female rock band *The Three Cats (Ba Con Mèo)*, which is reportedly a cultural icon of the local lesbian community.<sup>92</sup> Through such means of entertainment, both the *pedes* and *o-mois* are able to express their ostensible condolences with the grieving family members. But beware! These cunning homosexuals, according to these articles, are really after your valuable belongings and property. The reporter states,

Do not think that these pede gangs congregate merely to help with these assorted and chaotic festivities at funerals and weddings, that they are there only because of an artistic spirit. The trick of these pedes is to exploit the grieving family, to take their property and belongings left confusedly and inattentively during these festivities. To perform their special dances, their role as fake actresses in various theatrical renditions, these pedes enter the chambers to change into their ‘skirts’ and deftly pick-pocket people’s wallets, watches, gold etc.” (p.5)<sup>93</sup>

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Và bạn đừng tưởng các băng pê-đê tự nguyện kéo tới giúp vui văn nghệ tạp lục bát nháo trong các đám ma, đám cưới là hoàn toàn vì tinh thần văn nghệ. Mánh của pê-đê này là, lợi dụng tang gia bối rối của cải, quần áo để lơ đễnh, lúc vào buồng, vào nhà tắm thay đồ ‘xiêm y’ cho những màn múa độc đáo, những màn trích đoạn cải lương giả đào, giả kép các pê-đê đã đỡ nhẹ bóp tiền, đồng hồ, vàng, vòng, v.v. (p.5)

It is not always clear how the pede’s gender identity is related, if at all, to these acts of petty theft. It is almost as if by juxtaposing both the gender and the crime, these documents attempt to transfer, rhetorically, the criminal status of one to the other, a kind of metonymic use of guilt by association; or the rhetorical fallacy of *secundum quid* whereby a generalization about members of one set is misapplied to another. Theft is a crime because it is an expropriation of property without the owner’s consent. Yet, it does not follow that, by the deception that this act entails, the act of cross-dressing is also a deception. Nevertheless, as the subtitle of this article suggests—the “The Deceptive Tricks of the Pede”<sup>94</sup>—cross-dressing is deemed a problem, presumably, because it can serve as a subterfuge for a variety of criminal acts. Like the instances of theft above, the article calls attention to cases where cross-dressing could open the door to malingerers who wish to escape conscription and other civic duties. The article explains:

The life of a shadow, the life that is half-real and half fake, half-awake and half-unconscious, has led to a confused habit that is dangerous not only because it could lead to the AIDS infection... but also because it can lead to legal problems. Of course, there are those who are truly sick with the pede disease that they themselves are unhappy with, being trapped in a halfway house, a fate in which their families would also never wish their children ever to have... [But] there is no dearth of cases in which fake pedes try to escape conscription or other civic duties (p.5).

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[M]ôi trường đồng bóng, cuộc sống và sinh hoạt nửa giả nửa thật, nửa mê nửa tỉnh đó đã tạo thành thói quen lẫn lộn, nguy hiểm, không phải chỉ ở việc lây một chứng bệnh SIDA... mà còn đưa đẩy giới pêđê đi vào con đường phạm pháp. Dĩ nhiên có những người bị bệnh pêđê thật sự, họ không vui vẻ gì trong tình cảnh nửa đường, nửa đoạn ấy

<sup>92</sup> Bình Nguyễn and Duy Bình, “Người Đi Tìm Bóng Kì 1: Tiếng Khóc Trong Đêm (in Search of Shadows, Part 1: The Cries in the Night),” *Tuổi Trẻ (Youth)* May 3 2005.

<sup>93</sup> Sơn, “Tình Pêđê, Phần 4 (Pédé Love, Part 4).”

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. The original quotation: “Pê-Đê và các thủ đoạn lường gạt.”

và gia đình cũng không muốn cho con cái mình sống kiếp pê-đê ...Không thiếu những trường hợp giả pê-đê để trốn thi hành nghĩa vụ quân sự, nghĩa vụ lao động.

As in some of the previous documents, this one also produces two separate categories of pedes. To show how the pede's gender is a deceptive act, where "deception" is understood as a disguise of one's "true" self, the article has to distinguish between the real and fake pedes. Whereas the "real" ones are truly afflicted with a bodily disease, the "fake" ones attempt to deceive others by dressing in drag and exploiting the susceptibility of the perceiving subject. In either case, the implication is that the pede is not quite fully a man—implied in such catch phrases as "100% male" or "half-male, half female."<sup>95</sup> But if the pede is not quite a man and if conscription is mandatory for only men, then the pede cannot, therefore, be conscripted. As a result, malingers can exploit this loophole by using the idea of the pede as a pretense to avoid conscription. Therein lies the act of deception—the necessary link between criminality and pede identity.

Yet, the logic of the argument remains problematic. By its own reasoning, the population at issue is actually not the "real" pedes, exempted as they are by their so-called disease, but the "fake" ones who attempt to break the law and commit all sorts of crimes.<sup>96</sup> If a pede happens to be "fake," according to these articles, then by definition he cannot be a true pede. But if he is not a true pede, then within this cultural logic, he must presumably be a "real" man who cross-dresses and only performs the role of a pede, but for various dubious purposes. As the reporter states, "there are some people who are truly afflicted with the pede disease and there are some who are 'completely' male yet dress in women's clothes" ("có những người bị pê-đê thật và có những chàng trai 'nguyên si' nhưng đội lốt công gái" (p.5). Hence, the primary source of the anxiety is *not* the pede as such, but the population of "100%" men who, by dressing in drag, fail to perform their true masculinity—the rampant spread of "real" men who suddenly turn into "fake" pedes.

This anxiety is made clear in another article with the same theme. *Pede* prostitutes reportedly attempt to seduce other men only to rob them of their possessions. The ambiguity once again lies in the act of deception. Is the source of the problem due to the cross-dressing or theft? Or is it the act of theft by means of cross-dressing? In the conclusion, the article describes the unspoken source of the anxiety, namely that straight young men could also be "infected." The writer explains:

Of course, due to their curiosity in acquiring new sensations, they [straight men] have found their way here, befriending and having sexual relations in a diseased manner. They do not realize that after a short period of time living in this troubled way, **their "manly" qualities inside will completely disappear. From being strong men, they will become half-male half-females, with wholly abnormal psycho-physiologies that society won't accept.** That is not mentioning the AIDS calamity...in order to avoid falling into such circumstances like these two young men, Hung and Quang, we hope that young men avoid trying out these **exotic new sensations** and avoid the *pê-dês* altogether (my emphases).

<sup>95</sup> HA, "Giả Làm Gái Bán Dâm Để Ăn Cắp (Pretending to Be a Female Prostitute to Rob)," Thanh Niên (The Youth) May 30 1999.

<sup>96</sup>Other articles that display a like narrative: Việt Dũng, "Phá Bãng Pêđê Trộm Cắp Chuyên Nghiệp (Crushing Professional Pede Bandits)," Công An Nhân Dân Jan 4 2005, Việt Hồng, "Lời Cảnh Báo Từ Lối Sống Bệnh Hoạn (Words of Warning About a Sick Lifestyle)," Công An Nhân Dân April 2 2005. Tham Lang, "Pê Đê: Phong Trào Hay Hiện Tượng (Pede: A Trend or Phenomenon)," Thanh Niên (The Youth) Sept 30 1993.

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Tuy nhiên, vì khoái 'cảm giác lạ' nên họ đã mò đến đây, kết bạn và quan hệ tình dục theo lối bệnh hoạn. Họ không biết rằng, chỉ sau một thời gian ngắn sống theo kiểu thác loạn này, chất 'đàn ông con trai' trong họ sẽ biến mất. Từ những chàng trai khỏe mạnh, họ sẽ trở thành những kẻ nửa đực, nửa cái, có đời sống tâm sinh lý khác hẳn người thường, không được xã hội chấp nhận. Ấy là chưa kể tới thảm họa Sida... Để khỏi lâm vào thảm cảnh như 2 thành niên Hùng và Quang, chúng tôi mong các chàng trai chớ nên dính dấp vào đám pê-đê để thường thức 'cảm giác lạ!'" (p.6)<sup>97</sup>

If there is an organizing causal principle that governs these documents, it would be the pernicious effects of the open market on sexuality and gender. Through various entrepreneurial ventures e.g. prostitution, the market creates opportunities for novel and seductive forms of experience and desire—"exotic new sensations"—that will lead proper young men astray. As one medical doctor explains, by hanging out with "real homosexuals," healthy young men may end up, "acting in effeminate ways as if they are women,"<sup>98</sup> zapping their "manly" qualities and transforming them into "half-male, half-female" monstrosities. Incredibly and spectacularly, then, the market produces all sorts of "social evils," of which gender-crossing homosexuality is one pronounced manifestation.

Some newspapers, however, did issue reports of so-called "real" pedes who committed theft. For example, in an article entitled "Homosexual Thieves,"<sup>99</sup> the police caught what at first seemed like two women. After they were whisked away to the police station, however, it was discovered that they were actually "100% men" (*đực rựa 100%*), but "men" who were actively trying to change their sex. The article states, "Both Tan and Hung left home more than three years ago. Both frequented cosmetic boutiques in order to change their gender. They pump their breasts, reconstruct their eyebrows, bridge their noses, and work on their effeminate gait." (p.7).<sup>100</sup> Here, then, is an alternative explanation to these acts of theft: transgendered—and probably indigent—subjects who are actively seeking out the material resources to alter their bodies, and prostitution is likely a means for them to survive. Needless to say, the fine line between the "real" and the "fake" is a highly unstable and arbitrary one, not to mention the fact that these articles do not account for the complex immaterial dimensions that constitute identity. Even more tenuous is the link between the crime and the pede's gender. Yet, the juxtaposition of the two recurs, almost as if by sheer repetition, the media can establish an incontrovertible fact of criminality that is, in fact, a contestable artifice of representation.

### **Murderers and the Murdered**

If the prior documents are primarily preoccupied with the sexual integrity of "real" men, another core set of documents thematize, perhaps more directly, the perils to the nuclear family. Whereas the homosexual was previously depicted as luring "real" men away from their "true"

<sup>97</sup> Tuấn Hải, "Tình Pê-Đê: Vụ Cướp Đáng Ngờ (Pede Love: A Suspicious Robbery)," Công An Nhân Dân (People's Police) April 24 1995.

<sup>98</sup> The original quotation: "Còn tình trạng thứ hai là đồng tính luyến ái 'dzòm' mà ta vẫn thường gặp là những người cặp chung với người đồng giới tính... họ là những người bị ám ảnh, cứ nghĩ mình phải là nữ, rồi có những hành động như nữ giới" (p.2). T. Thang, "Đồng Tính Luyến Ái Có Phải Là 'Bệnh'?" (Is Homosexuality a 'Disease?'), Lao Động (Labor) 1998.

<sup>99</sup> Trung Hà, "Những Tên Trộm Đồng Tính (Homosexual Thieves)," An Ninh Thủ Đô (Security in the Capital) Mar 22 2004.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. The original quotation: "Cả Tấn và Hùng đều đã bỏ nhà từ hơn 3 năm nay. Cả hai đối tượng đều đến hiệu thẩm mỹ để thay đổi giới tính. Bơm ngực, xăm mi mắt, nâng mũi, và luyện dáng đi. Lang thang trong giới đồng tính một thời gian ngắn..." (p.7)

gendered selves, in the documents that follow, the homosexual is portrayed as a juggernaut that shatters the bonds of the traditional nuclear family. This message is exemplified in a reportage entitled “A Story of Ô-Môi Love.”<sup>101</sup> In this article, the journalist recounts the triangular relationship between two women and a man: Tam, Lien and Ha, Lien’s fiancé. Nobody suspected that the two women were in a relationship with each other, one that went beyond a “sisterly” bond, except for the fiancé. Scared of the *ô-môi* influence on his girlfriend, Ha forbids Lien from associating herself with Tam and other *ô-môi* friends. But the injunction is futile because, according to the journalist, the “seductive powers of the *ô-môi* were far stronger” (“sự cám dỗ của đám ô môi mạnh hơn”). Just as Ha despised (“câm giận”) the *o-mois*, so too did they consider him their *bête noire*--a “rival” for Lien’s affection (“tình địch”). One day the lesbian friends invite Lien to hang out with them. But Ha disapproves and drives them away--even physically striking them. Indignant and humiliated, the “*o-moi gang*” concocts a scheme to slit Ha’s throat. In the conclusion, the article takes pity on the dead fiancé: “What is regrettable is that Nguyen Tan Ha died all because he was preventing a **sick** relationship from transpiring with an *o-moi gang*” (“Nhưng sự việc đáng tiếc là việc Nguyễn Tấn Hà chết khi chỉ vì ngăn cản mối quan hệ **bệnh hoạn** với đám ‘ô môi.’” (p.4)). The article ends with a call for better security measures that would “resolve” the increasing number of “*pê-dê* cases.”

Despite the regrettable tragedy, the complete facts of which we may never know, the article is written with a clear bias in favor of the embattled fiancé and his plight against the seductive lesbians. Notably, the narrative is framed in terms of homosexuality’s destructive effects on the traditional family. These lesbians are viewed as destructive insofar as one is invested in certain narrowly conceived forms of kinship that disregard the complex desires of the multiple parties involved. The article fails to consider, for example, Lien and her desire to continue seeing her lesbian friends. But because their desire is deemed pathological (“sick relationship”), it is not a viable option within the narrative and hence unworthy of consideration. Hence, Lien’s interest becomes irrelevant, much like the revolutionary period when women had to sacrifice themselves in the name of war and national defense. But unlike that period, instead of being celibate and childless, they must now subordinate their desires to another ideal, namely that of the traditional nuclear family. If this point seems difficult to accept because bourgeois culture tends to naturalize these same ideals, some further examples might help bring this critique into relief.

A similar narrative takes place in another reportage entitled “The World of *Pê-Dê* and its Consequences.”<sup>102</sup> In a two-part series, the article acknowledges the World Health Organization’s 1999 declaration that homosexuality is not a disease. The article further acknowledges the distinction between homosexuality and *pe-de* identity whereby the latter is commonly associated with cross-dressing. The article’s preface states:

We have long considered *pede* or homosexuality to be the same phenomenon and have considered them a disease. But today specialists have affirmed that they are not diseases but primarily symptoms due to an attraction for the wrong **object-choice** and also due to psychological and societal factors; on the other hand, *pede* refers to the males who have an interest in dressing, putting on make-up like women, who have the tendency to be attracted to the opposite sex but at times can also have sexual relations with the same sex (my emphasis).

<sup>101</sup> Anh, “Chuyện Tình Ô-Mai (a Lesbian Love Affair) ”.

<sup>102</sup> Đặng Hồng Giang, ““Thế Giới Pê-Đê” Và Những Kết Cục, Phần 1 (“The World of Pede and Its Consequences, Part 1”),” Công An Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh March 6 1999.

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Pê-đê hay đồng tính luyến ái (ĐTLA) lâu nay chúng ta vẫn quan niệm đó là một và xem như một loại bệnh lý, nhưng đến nay các nhà chuyên môn đã khẳng định đó không phải là bệnh mà chủ yếu do người bị lúc trưởng thành có quan niệm lệch lạc về tình dục cộng thêm yếu tố tâm lý, xã hội tác động; còn pê-đê là dạng nam giới có sở thích mặc quần áo, trang điểm son phấn như nữ giới, có khuynh hướng tình dục khác giới nhưng đôi khi cũng quan hệ tình dục cùng giới.

Despite this acknowledgment, the article proceeds to condemn these classes of people through the use of “typical” narratives (“trường hợp điển hình”). The article opens dramatically with the image of a family altar and a charred house in ruins. The act of arson, we later discover, was committed by a lesbian, Ngo Thi Huong who, in an act of rage, burnt down the house of Phan Thi Phuong, a lover. The altar commemorates a victim of the fire, Phuong’s sibling. The narrative is recounted from the perspective of Phuong’s mother. After detecting Huong’s “sickness,” the mother forbids her daughter from seeing her lover. Devastated by the separation, Huong insists on seeing Phuong. But the mother enforces the separation which leads to subsequent threats by Huong the full consequences of which are now clear. The article concludes:

Through this case, we can easily see the tragic consequences of a hopeless kind of love in the ‘pede world.’ It leads to injury and death not only to the people involved, but also to those around them.

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Qua vụ án trên đây, chúng ta dễ dàng nhận ra kết cục bi thảm của một mối tình tuyệt vọng trong ‘thế giới pê-đê’. Nó không chỉ làm phung phí đên nhân phẩm, tính mạng của người trong cuộc mà còn là mối hiểm họa lớn cho những người xung quanh.

Like the murderous “gang of *ô-môis*” above, this lesbian affair also leads to a destruction of the family unit, inflicting trauma on the mother and causing death of a family member, as if these are inevitable consequences of all homosexual relations. In the second part of this series, another narrative is used to drive home this point. The article describes the travails of a husband whose wife becomes “infected” with the homosexual “disease.” Upon returning from work one day, the husband is stunned upon finding his wife rolling in bed with another person. The article explains:

He went straight to the sleeping quarters and witnessed a dreadful sight: his wife was rolling in bed with another female business partner who often visited his house; a thin cloth draped both of their bodies... After that experience of shock, he had suddenly realized that his wife was inflicted with a disease. But after some tears and begging from his wife, he had simply thought that woman-on-woman would lead to no major consequence, that a cure would be found and that some loving admonishments would be enough. But the above incident repeated itself and by the fourth time, there were no longer tears and anguish when his wife declared: ‘My love and body no longer belong to you.’

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[A]nh đi thẳng vào buồng thì một cảnh tượng vô cùng khiếp đảm đập vào mắt: vợ anh cùng với một ‘bạn hàng’ nữ thường đến nhà anh đang quấn quít trên giường, cả hai đều không một mảnh vải che thân... Sau cú sốc đó, anh chột hiều từ lâu vợ anh đã bị nhiễm bệnh. Song sau những giọt nước mắt ăn năn của vợ, lúc đó anh chỉ nghĩ đơn giản là nữ với nữ không ảnh hưởng gì mấy, rồi sẽ tìm thuốc điều trị và khuyên nhủ từ từ. Nhưng

thời gian sau đó tình trạng trên lại liên tục tái diễn, lần thứ tư thì không còn là những giọt nước mắt đau khổ nữa, vợ anh đã thẳng thừng tuyên bố: ‘Tình yêu và thể xác tôi giờ không còn là của anh nữa.

As one can see, these articles are far from “objective” news reports but function as powerful narratives that convey an ideological message. It is notable here that homosexuality is not so much a “foreign infection” as a “disease” to which anyone is susceptible. That is, regardless of its etiology, homosexuality is a threat to the integrity and future of the nuclear family. This conclusion, therefore, contradicts the claim by Jacob Aronson—perhaps influenced by Nguyen Quoc Vinh’s thesis—that when “pederasty is deemed possible,” it is “translocated to some exotic foreign place outside of Vietnam” (p.206).<sup>103</sup> On the contrary, this document is consistent with Nguyen Vo Thu-Huong’s observation that in this period, “Crime was no longer narrated as an alien phenomenon” (p.150).<sup>104</sup> Despite the World Health Organization’s pronouncement, this narrative has the rhetorical effect of trumping all other matters. Who cares about technical minutia or official declarations when the consequences of homosexuality strike at the heart of people’s worse fears: the destruction of one’s home, death of a family member, loss of a fiancé and other loved ones.

The dangers that the homosexual poses to the nuclear family come in a variety of forms. Whereas the examples I have shown thus far demonstrate how homosexuals threaten to snatch one’s partner away, presuming, therefore, the uncontrollable susceptibility of one’s partner to homosexual seduction, so other kinds of articles illustrate how, for example, improper forms of child-rearing can lead to homosexuality.

In a five-part series, the *Ho Chi Minh City’s Police* tracked the story of a lesbian love murder. “The Ending of a Rare Kind of Love” was first reported in December of 1988 and followed up in August of 1989.<sup>105</sup> After relating the circumstances in which the two women, Ngọc Hà and Đức Thuận, met and fell in love, the author describes their break-up. Đức Thuận confesses to Ngọc Hà that she no longer loves her. The latter “drops” her head, looks up and then cries: “Have you forgotten our cup of sororal blood?” A flash of jealousy seizes Ngọc Hà who plots to kill her ex-girlfriend. The diegesis pauses at this moment of suspension, as the intrusive narrator tries to explain: Ms. Ngọc Hà is no longer moved by the seductions of the opposite sex; she is struck with the “diabolic disease of homosexuality” (“căn bệnh quái ác đồng tính luyến ái”). “The homosexual disease which is commonly known as PD [Pede],” the narrator continues, “is presently a problem in the fields of medicine, ethics and psychoanalysis, a disease which does not yet have a cure.”<sup>106</sup> The article then fasts forward to the murder scene. After slitting her ex-lover’s throat, Ms. Ngọc Hà looks at the palm of her hands “soaked” in Ms. Đức Thuận’s blood which was “spurting out like a red stream.” We need hardly remark on the article’s attempt to implicate homosexuality and homicidal conduct wherein one becomes the external marker for the other. As if the pathology of the homosexual were not clear enough to the reader, in the final article of the series, the writer drives home the point: “Ms. Duc Thuan’s death is the alarm bell reminding people who have a responsibility to monitor ‘unnatural’ love relationships in boys and girls; their responsibility is to teach proper sex and gender education.” As a warning to parents

<sup>103</sup> Aronson, “Homosex in Hanoi? Sex, the Public Sphere, and Public Sex.”

<sup>104</sup> Thu-Huong, *The Ironies of Freedom: Sex, Culture, and Neoliberal Governance in Vietnam*.

<sup>105</sup> Nguyễn Thiện, “Đoạn Kết Của Cuộc Tình ‘Hi Hữu,’ Phần 1 (the Ending of a Rare Kind of Love, Part 1),” *Công An Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh (Ho Chi Minh City Police)* Dec 28 1988.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. “Căn bệnh đồng tính luyến ái mà mọi người quen gọi là PD [Pêđê] đang là mối quan tâm của ngành y học, đạo đức học, phân tâm học, một căn bệnh nguy hiểm chưa có thuốc trị.”

everywhere, the author concludes: “families who enjoy dressing up their girls as boys and vice versa could cause their children psychological problems” (p.5).<sup>107</sup> The implication is clear: homosexuality led Ms. Ngoc Ha to commit murder, and if one dresses children up like a homosexual, they may commit murder like Ms. Ngoc Ha. One uncontrollable passion, the article implies, leads to another and to the breakdown of all morality and the social institutions that are built upon them. Through a specious kind of logic, homosexuality becomes both the cause and effect of Ngoc Hà’s murderous behavior. Had she been heterosexual, would the Police and Army link this behavior to her “heterosexuality”? Would dressing up like a “heterosexual” lead to a homicidal psyche? The article attributes an act to an entire class of people, who in turn come to represent the act itself, producing in effect a pathological character-type that is both identifiable and knowable.

The prior article also presupposes something of the ideal processes of gender differentiation. In particular, it assumes that a child’s gender development relies on the proper identification with the mother and father in a nuclear family. We have already elaborated on this theory in relation to the incest taboo in the prior chapter. This theory may admittedly seem implausible to some readers, but queer scholars are not presenting it as an empirical claim, but as one plausible way to understand the linking of homosexuality with gender-crossing. So when the author states that girls who dress up as boys may end up with “unnatural” love relationships, s/he is making an implicit reference to this structural schema. In assuming the wrong symbolic position of the boy and identifying with the father instead of the mother, the murderous lesbians depart from this gender-differentiating mechanism and thereby institute their homosexuality, which falls outside of the parameters of culture. In this way, the article constructs homosexuality as a public problem that involves the proper development of gender identity, one that bourgeois families ought to remain ever vigilant.

Skeptics could dismiss this interpretation in claiming that the author in question—indeed, the majority of Vietnamese—have never read Lévi-Strauss. On what grounds, then, have I to link this theory to the Vietnamese case? First of all, whether conscious or not, the text itself is gesturing towards this reading. Recall that the above writer refers to homosexuality as an unresolved “problem in the fields of medicine, ethics and **psychoanalysis**.” I am merely unpacking certain assumptions that would remain otherwise unarticulated. Second, writers need not be conscious of the theories on which their ideas rest, much the same way that one need not be aware that Native American Indian worldviews influenced the principles of the U.S. Constitution in order to support the ideals of the document.<sup>108</sup> Likewise, the Vietnamese need not be aware of the sources of their various beliefs. Hence, it follows that they need not be aware of this psychoanalytic theory of gender development, much less have read it, to be promulgating ideas whose origin is often linked to it.

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<sup>107</sup>Phạm Tường Niệm, "Trở Lại Vụ Án Hai Cô Gái Yêu Nhau, Phần 5 (Returning to the Case of Two Women Who Loved Each Other, Part 5)," *Công An Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh (Ho Chi Minh City Police)* Aug 30 1989. The original quotation: "Phải chăng cái chết của Đức Thuận là một tiếng chuông báo động nhắc cho những người có trách nhiệm phải quan tâm đến hiện tượng trai, gái 'yêu nhau' không bình thường này để có biện pháp giáo dục giới tính, và cách giải quyết tốt hơn, tránh hậu quả xấu. Đồng thời những gia đình nào, các bậc cha mẹ nào có con cái mang tâm lý 'không bình thường' cũng phải đặc biệt quan tâm, chăm sóc, giáo dục. Có nhiều gia đình thích mặc đồ con trai cho con gái của mình, hoặc ngược lại, cũng là một tác nhân gây tâm lý bất bình thường trong quá trình phát triển tâm sinh lý của đứa trẻ" (p.5).

<sup>108</sup> See Donald A. Grinde Jr. and Bruce E. Johansen, *Exemplar of Liberty: Native America and the Evolution of Democracy*, Native American Politics Series, vol. 3 (Los Angeles University of California, Los Angeles, 1991).

Setting Lévi-Strauss aside, we can still retain the conceptual link between gender and culture that his theory helps us to understand. In the present case, Lisa Drummond has shown that Vietnam, like China, shifted to a national discourse that deployed a rhetoric of “civility” and “modernity,” embodied most clearly in the Party’s Civilized Way of Life and Cultured Family Campaign. As I explained in an earlier section, these campaigns produced a standard by which all families ought to adhere to become “harmonious” and “happy”; it highlighted Drummond writes, the reproductive role of women within a “domestic space.” “Visually,” Drummond further notes, “the slogans and exhortations of mobilization campaigns are an unavoidable feature of the physical and social landscape.” She continues, “[I]n some areas, households which have attained the Cultured Family standards are given plaques which serve to designate their house as sheltering a Cultured Family” (162).<sup>109</sup> Consistent with these campaigns, the media reportages in question written by the Police and Army most likely support this larger ideological resurgence of mythic tradition and its accompanying norms of gender identity and comportment. Within this context, the figure of the gender-crossing homosexual could be nothing more than an uncivilized abomination, an incarnation of the moral perils to the nuclear family in this new era of the market economy.

### V. Queer and Questioning, or the Psychic Life of Power

Further evidence of the twinning of homosexuality with gender inversion surfaces in the letters that people send to the editor. In these letters, the narrative I reconstructed above is reversed. Whereas homosexuality was previously figured as destructive to the family, these documents suggest that the family can now be the means to their salvation--the antidote to their woes. Most of these documents come from “queer and questioning” readers who write in search of advice about their “strange” sexual feelings. In the process, they furnish us with evidentiary traces of the lived cultural experience of homosexuality.

At this point, it is worth introducing Dr. Tran Bong Son, one of the most well-known sex advice columnist in the Vietnamese print media, the equivalent of Dear Abby or Dan Savage.<sup>110</sup> Dr. Son’s column, however, comes across as more authoritative and certainly more solemn than Savage’s irreverent, tongue-in-cheek attitude. Until his death in 2004, Dr. Son was known for almost two decades as the leading sexologist for his column in the *Age of Youth* (Tuoi Tre), the title of which is roughly translated as, “I have questions but don’t know who to ask” (“Thắc mắc biết hỏi ai”).<sup>111</sup> His column was one of the few public outlets which people could turn to for questions and advice about either their sexuality or that of their loved ones—as well as a place to where several self-identified queers, in their anguish, submitted suicides notes. For example, in one article, a twenty-four year old Ho Chi Minh City reader admitted to having thoughts of suicide, because s/he feels s/he is a woman trapped in a man’s body: “When I was very young, I had always sensed that something was not right about me, as if I were a woman trapped in a man’s body.”<sup>112</sup> The writer continues: “Oh Doctor!...I am very afraid of people’s advice: **Just**

<sup>109</sup> Drummond, “The Modern ‘Vietnamese Woman’: Socialization and Women’s Magazines.”

<sup>110</sup> In the rare case that the reader does not know who Dan Savage is, he or she is welcome to check out the following website: <<http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/SavageLove?oid=4735183>>

<sup>111</sup> See the following: <<http://vietbao.vn/Doi-song-Gia-dinh/Chao-tien-biet-bac-si-Tran-Bong-Son-Thac-mac-biet-hoi-ai-bay-gio/45137583/111/>>

<sup>112</sup> The original quotation. “Kể từ lúc âu thơ em đã thấy mình có tâm trạng khác thường, như là mang tâm hồn của con gái trong một thể xác con trai” (p.8). Trần Bồng Sơn, “Bác Sĩ Ồi! Em Muốn Thay Đổi Giới Tính (Hello, Doctor! I Would Like a Sex Change),” *Tuổi Trẻ (Youth)* July 16 1992.

**get married and your illness will be cured! Stop imagining things!”**<sup>113</sup> After rejecting marriage as a viable solution, s/he ends her (or his) note with suicidal thoughts. The doctor responds to the note, admitting that he is somewhat perplexed because he does not know whether the writer is attracted to men or women. He then states, “I suspect you are probably a homosexual” (“Theo tôi nghĩ thì em là người đồng tính ái...”). The doctor then explains that in the twentieth century there is no cure for the “illness of homosexuality.” Unlike hermaphrodites, the doctor explains, homosexuals exhibit no overt bodily symptoms. Therefore, there is no need for surgery.

We can criticize Dr. Tran Bong Son on any number of grounds. We can accuse him of his pathologizing rhetoric, offering no hope to the writer in question, not to mention his dubious judgments about another’s identity. As Don Colby, an HIV/AIDs medical researcher, has remarked, despite the doctor’s influence on the general population, including medical professionals and policy makers, Dr. Son’s column probably reflects more of his “opinion than on any research or data” (48).<sup>114</sup> This criticism is correct to some degree, but Colby’s dismissive attitude is not entirely warranted either. It is true that Dr. Son fails to consider other interpretive possibilities, namely that the writer in question could legitimately be a Male to Female (MTF) transgendered person rather than a “homosexual” who believes that a sex-change operation is the solution to his or her predicament. That said, however, not everything Dr. Son writes is inaccurate. As a graduate of Saigon’s University of Medicine in 1968, he did correctly explain to readers the various modes of HIV transmission.<sup>115</sup> Hence, Colby’s curt, two-paragraph dismissal—without any close reading—is an inappropriate response and, in some ways, reminiscent of French colonial doctors who, steeped in their western knowledge, were blind to the colonial reality. Even more troubling is that this bias has been uncritically accepted by other researchers.<sup>116</sup> My point here is not to nitpick over details, but to encourage a more careful and attentive reading of the Vietnamese sources, which in fact reveal another, equally vital issue: the belief in the traditional family structure as the panacea to one’s problems.

The writer above evinces the effectiveness if not power of the State’s ideology of the family. This ideology has powerfully instilled in people norms of conduct, thought and behavior, even producing in them a guilty conscience. Even though the writer above believes that marriage would merely exacerbate his/her problem, everyone else seems to think the opposite: the family form has become not only the ideal to which all proper subjects ought to aspire, but also the unquestioned remedy to one’s sexual problems: “Just get married and your illness will be cured!” This case explains what Judith Butler means when she writes that, “The thought of a possible life is only an indulgence for those who already know themselves to be possible. For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity” (p.31).<sup>117</sup> Might the

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<sup>113</sup> The original quotation: “Bác sĩ ơi! Em biết phải làm gì bây giờ? Em rất sợ những lời khuyên theo kiểu: Hãy cưới vợ đi bệnh sẽ hết! Đừng có tưởng tượng nữa!”. Sơn, “Bác Sĩ Ối! Em Muốn Thay Đổi Giới Tính (Hello, Doctor! I Would Like a Sex Change).”

<sup>114</sup> Donn Colby, Nghia Huu Cao and Serge Doussantousse, “Men Who Have Sex with Men and Hiv in Vietnam: A Review,” *AIDS Education and Prevention* 16.1 (2004).

<sup>115</sup> Trần Bồng Sơn, “Sida Và Nguy Cơ Cao (Aids and Its Dangers),” *Tuổi Trẻ (Youth)* Jun 17 1993.

<sup>116</sup> Marie-Eve Blanc, “Social Construction of Male Homosexualities in Vietnam: Some Keys to Understanding Discrimination and Implications for Hiv Prevention Strategy,” *International Social Science Journal* 57.186 (2006), Ngo, Ross, Phan, Ratliff, Trinh and Sherburne, “Male Homosexual Identities, Relationships, and Practices among Young Men Who Have Sex with Men in Vietnam: Implications for Hiv Prevention.”

<sup>117</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*.

person in question be groping for that space of the possible--and in his or her despair turn to suicide as the final solution?

Indeed, the power of the State and its norms are illustrated in another article.<sup>118</sup> A male reader, seeking advice, reveals that he is struck with the “homosexual disease.” This disease has tormented him and his family. Despite being a “man,” he confesses, he psychically identifies as a “woman.” Now, it is unclear whether this is a case of a “gay” man or a transexual who dis-identifies with his or her gender or some other complex configuration. Either way, the writer subsumes this problem under the rubric of “homosexuality.” He explains,

For the past ten years, I have been placed in the strange circumstance of living as a man on the outside, but deep down I am a woman on the inside. I have no feelings for women, only for men...but this **homosexual disease** has taken over my life, making my wife and I feel deeply unhappy...(p.2).<sup>119</sup>

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Đã 10 năm qua tôi sống trong tình trạng ngoài vỏ là đàn ông nhưng trong ruột lại là đàn bà, Tôi chẳng thiết tha với đàn bà mà lại gần gũi với đàn ông...song căn **bệnh đồng tính** đã lấn át tất cả khiến tôi lẫn người vợ tội nghiệp đều cảm thấy bất hạnh... (p.2).

Like the prior example, this writer’s attitude further supports one of my central claims, namely the twinning of homosexuality with the figure of the gender-crosser or sexual invert—the woman trapped in a man’s body or vice versa. The difference between this article and the prior one lies in the editor’s response. Providing a solution to the man’s problems, the editor states,

Once you have made the resolve to be a real man, then there is no better way than to self-adjust one’s own feelings so that they are re-directed towards women, especially towards your young wife who loves you with all her heart and who carries within her a piece of your own flesh. Only firmness of purpose and self-resolve will help you return to the character of a real man and to the right gender, so that you can overcome the ‘diseased’ desires of homosexuals.<sup>120</sup>

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[M]ột khi bạn đã tự nhận thức muốn trở thành một đàn ông thật sự, thì còn cách gì tốt hơn là tự bạn phải điều chỉnh tình cảm của mình, sao cho cân cân tình cảm nghiêng hẳn về phía nữ giới, nhất là với người vợ trẻ đang yêu bạn hết mực và đang mang trong mình cốt nhục của bạn. Chỉ có nghị lực và sự quyết tâm của bạn mới giúp bạn trở về với bản năng của một người đàn ông thực thụ, của giới, để vượt qua được những ham muốn ‘bệnh hoạn’ của người đồng tính.

The role of the family plays a contradictory role in this passage. On one hand, it is the ideal to which one ought to aspire; on the other, it is simultaneously the source of one’s own suffering. How can something be at once a desired ideal yet a source of suffering? Perhaps when the ideal is difficult if not impossible to realize. Indeed, I would suggest that these documents enact a rhetorical metalepsis, whereby an effect substitutes for a cause. Whereas these documents imply that the failure to live up to the family ideal is the cause of one’s problems, in no way do they consider whether the opposite might be the case: these idealized family values, promulgated by

<sup>118</sup> Hà Anh, "Tình Yêu Và Đứa Con Sẽ Giúp Bạn Chiến Thắng 'Bệnh' Đồng Tính (Love and Bearing a Child Will Help You Overcome Your Homosexual "Disease")," *Tiền Phong (Vanguard)* Feb 29 2000.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

the State, in fact, engineer a guilty conscience, producing the very object they seek to control.<sup>121</sup> They demand perpetual performance to show compliance to the ideal. But since few people can continuously sustain this performance and some simply cannot do so at all, they thereby develop a guilty-conscience. Consider another example of a twenty-seven year old woman who writes to the editor for help. She was in a blissful relationship with another woman until she started feeling guilty and impious for having the “homosexual disease.” So she decided to break up with her girlfriend and forced herself to have a boyfriend, but to no avail. She writes:

This year I am 27, a teacher at an elementary school. Since the tenth grade, I knew that I was struck with the **homosexual disease**...After several meetings with H [girlfriend’s abbreviated name] I felt as if **I had wronged H’s parents**, and H herself...I had asked H to help me forget about our relationship, but when H did exactly as I asked, I felt sunken and suffered miserably...**Why can’t I seem to desire any man whatsoever**, even though according to **shared public sentiments** I still desire to have a **family**? (my emphasis).<sup>122</sup>

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 Năm nay em 27 tuổi, là giáo viên dạy ở trường tiểu học. Từ năm lớp 10, em phát hiện ra mình đã **mắc bệnh đồng tính luyến ái**...Sau những lần gặp H em thấy mình thật đáng trách và cảm thấy mình **có lỗi với bố mẹ H, với H**...Em đã nhờ H giúp em quên đi mọi chuyện nhưng đến khi H thực hiện đúng theo lời em yêu cầu thì em thấy mình suy sụp và đau khổ vô cùng...Tiền Phong ơi, tại sao em lại không thể luyến với bất cứ người con trai nào, mặc dầu **theo lẽ thường tình** em vẫn mơ ước có **một mái ấm gia đình**.”

The woman feels torn, on one hand, by her own desires and, on the other, by her moral conscience. But her conscience, far from being a private matter, is crafted by social determinants, not least of which is the State’s social program to promote “cultured families.” Yet, the editor responds to this reader by blaming the latter for her own failure. Almost like a Kantian categorical imperative, the editor concludes that the writer in question has failed to use Reason to overcome Desire: “You yourself admit that your faculty of reason has been unable to overcome your desire.” (“Vậy là tự bản thân em đã nhận được tất cả nhưng lý trí vẫn chưa thắng được tình cảm.”). Given this recurring idealization of the family, it is no wonder that when a pop-star was rumored to have had the homosexual “disease”—in virtue of his effeminate gait—he vigorously marshalled the ideals of the proper nuclear family in his defense.<sup>123</sup>

### Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to reconstruct the dominant cultural meaning of homosexuality in Vietnam during the two-decades after the advent of Renovation (1986-2005), the period of the country’s transition from a central command to market economy. I have argued that, based on documents published by various State organs, the sexological discourse of gender inversion (or sex-role reversal) usurped the meaning of homosexuality. For the State, this ambiguous figure of the homosexual signified a category crisis over the normative regulation of gender, the limits of the State’s perpetual attempt to discipline bodies during this period of the open market and to conceptualize gendered and sexual life in terms of the household and marriage.

<sup>121</sup> Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals* which charts Christianity’s making of bad-conscience would be relevant to the discussion here.

<sup>122</sup> Hà Anh, “Hãy Vượt Qua Chính Mình (One Ought to Overcome Oneself),” *Tiền Phong (Vanguard)* Nov 7 2000.

<sup>123</sup> Phong Hào, “Sự Từ Tế Thì Không Có Giới Tính (If There Were Decency, There Would Be No Gender),” *Tiền Phong (Vanguard)* April 22 2003.

In Vietnam's entry into the global market, the State retreated from managing many aspects of Vietnamese life by shifting the burden of social welfare to the family unit. This unit, in turn, however, became the State's regulatory target in the maintenance of a neoliberal economic order. As Vo Thu Huong has argued, governing for the neoliberal global market requires the promotion of market freedom, on the one hand, and, on the other, measures of repression based on traditional notions of Vietnamese femininity.<sup>124</sup> Yet, in taking up the fundamental definitions of the State, researchers and scholars garner certain kinds of knowledge but also risk losing sight of those subjects who confound or fall outside of the State's conceptual parameters. In specifying the parameters of gender recognition and comportment, the State had to exclude certain kinds of characters and to base its own identity and territory on those exclusions. One of these figures was embodied as the gender-crossing homosexual.

In reality, of course, this figure was more of a confused mishmash of diverse sexual characters. From that of the cross-dressing prostitute to the femme fatale lesbians, the female corpse with "guns," and the sadomasochistic bodies and onwards to subjects who felt "trapped" in another sexed body, the "homosexual" functioned as a convenient label to designate all such queer bodies, genders and desires.

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<sup>124</sup> Thu-Huong, The Ironies of Freedom: Sex, Culture, and Neoliberal Governance in Vietnam.

## Conclusion

One of the key conclusions of this study is that while the European idea of gender inversion did survive in transmuted form in Vietnam, its successful transmission failed to occur during the colonial period in question (1930-1940). Indeed, this dissertation has posited a diachronic rupture in the historical trajectory of the meaning of queer genders and sexualities between the period of late French colonialism and post-socialism. Whereas the late colonial era revealed a far more capacious and complex vision of gender and sexuality, one that pushed the frontiers of the human body, the post-socialist period marked a retreat to a traditional notion of gender and sexual life, one that pathologized queer bodies and desires through recourse to this nineteenth-century European idea of gender inversion, the man “trapped” in a women’s body or vice versa.

The late French colonial era (1930-1940) and the post-socialist one (1986-2005) in Vietnam were dramatic periods of transition. In the colonial period, we witnessed the decline of an older generation of scholar-gentry and the emergence of a younger cohort of intellectuals, some of whom were educated in France or in Franco-Annamite schools. This younger cohort well versed in the French language and the modern vernacular represented a decisive departure from their forefathers in their lack of ties to their East Asian cultural past. The early 1930s thus stood at the crossroads of these two generations with their differing worldviews towards sex, gender and desire. Likewise, the post-socialist period marked what could arguably be said as another cataclysmic transition: Vietnam’s open doors policy and shift to the global market economy. This shift led the socialist State to retreat from many aspects of Vietnamese life, even as it nevertheless augmented its powers in regulating the nuclear family and, by extension, the ideals of proper gender and sexuality.

In characterizing these periods of rapid social, cultural and economic modernization, scholars of Vietnam Studies have extensively documented the shifting cultural norms that govern men’s and women’s gender practices in both periods. As this dissertation has suggested, however, they have taken for granted heterosexual dimorphism as the prevailing modality of sexual organization in their reconstruction of the gendered past. This is the case in the majority of the gender and sexuality scholarship focusing on either period. Whether the text is a seminal piece of work on the colonial era, such as David Marr’s *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial* (1981) or a more recent work of scholarship on the post-socialist decades, such as the critical anthology *Reconfiguring Families in Contemporary Vietnam* (2009), almost all presume a heterosexual bias, by which this dissertation has meant the presumption of a binary and stable notion of gender and sexual identity.

Queer scholars, however, have called into question this problematic bias in scholarship. They have revealed this binary and stable notion of gender and sexual identity to be a product of a sexual regime that uniformly aligns anatomy, sex, gender, psyche, and desire. In limiting what one considers as “real” and “possible” within the cultural field of intelligibility, this regime insists on one form of sexual organization at the expense of other possible forms of gendered and sexual life; as a result, this regime is implicated in complex questions of power. To overcome these effects of power, queer scholars have turned to critical historiography. By disaggregating these various elements, exposing their historicity and disrupting their putative necessity, queer scholars are able to reveal them as arbitrary cultural and historical forms of sexual organization. In so doing, queer scholars have sought to loosen the regime’s epistemological stranglehold on

sexual and gender vocabularies and open up a plurality of other possible historical forms of genders and sexualities, what this dissertation has called queer subjects. But whereas a substantial body of research and knowledge exists about these issues in the West, little historical scholarship has been produced in the case of twentieth-century Vietnam. This dissertation has attempted to supplement this gap in knowledge, demonstrating a diachronic rupture in the meaning of queer gender and sexuality between the late French colonial period and the post-socialist decades.

In support of this historical claim, Chapter One demonstrated the flourishing of gender plasticity during the late French colonial period. I suggested that while scholars of Vietnam Studies have rightly located this period as the genesis of the modern women's liberation movement, their understanding of gender has been too limited. They have collapsed the history of gender emancipation into that of heterosexual dimorphism, foreclosing in the process a plurality of other forms of genders and sexualities. This first chapter attempted to recuperate some of these diverse forms.

Consistent with the first chapter, Chapter Two maintained that this nineteenth-century sexual regime that Foucault and other scholars have identified in Europe reaches its limit in late colonial Vietnam. My argument is based on a negative inference. If this regime did, in fact, make significant headway into the colony, then we ought to be able to locate its effects in the medical, psychoanalytic, cultural, and institutional discourses of this period—when French culture would presumably have made its strongest impact. The chapter goes on to show that since we cannot clearly locate these effects, or rather, these effects are lukewarm at best, it cannot be the case that this sexual regime made a decisive impact on the local culture. This is not to claim that this sexological discourse did not circulate in the colonial period but only that it had not yet achieved cultural hegemony. As the chapter demonstrated, certain sexological concepts and vocabularies did circulate in the cultural discourse but only to be localized and adopted for other cultural ends, such as the free-love movement. Consistent with the prior chapter, then, Chapter Two lends further interpretive weight to the argument that the normative meaning of gender and sexuality in this period was far more dynamic and expansive than the contemporary scholarship has acknowledged.

Chapter Three demonstrated the cultural dominance of this sexological regime during the post-socialist decades. Drawing on over 305 primary print sources published since the two decades since Vietnam entered the global market economy in 1986, I argue that the presence of this sexual regime is no more evident than in the prevailing cultural understanding of homosexuality as a form of gender-crossing or inversion. Other scholars of this period have overlooked the representation of queer genders and sexualities, perhaps, because of their undue focus on the States's unit of regulation: the nuclear household- and family-unit. The result, however, is that scholars lose sight of a vast plurality of other sexual subjects that the State excluded to shore up the limits of this regulatory unit.

Together these chapters support the overall argument of a historical rupture in the cultural meaning of queer genders and sexualities between the period of late French colonialism and post-socialism in Vietnam. In reconstructing this rupture, the dissertation has sought to defamiliarize contemporary practices, beliefs and commitments and, above all, illumine an alternative genealogy of twentieth-century Vietnamese gendered life.

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